

Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki - Volume 02

Yuki Yaku

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Bottom-Tier
CHARACTER TOMOZAKI

Bottom-
Tier

CHARACTER
TOMOZAKI

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Lv.2









Hinami's
speech had
begun.

"Good
morning.
I'm
Aoi Hinami."

1 The characters who become your friends after you clear a hard event usually have high stats

Bottom-Tier
Character Tomozaki, Level 2

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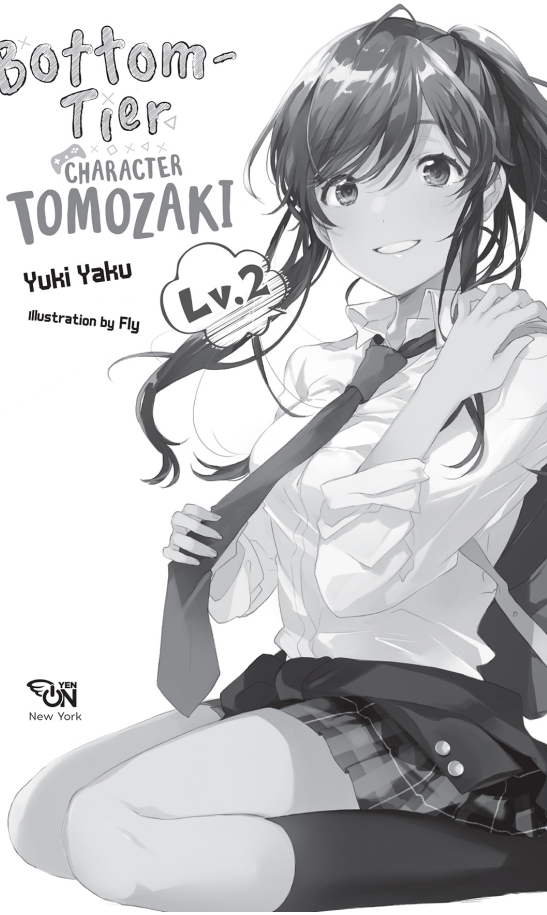
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Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki, Vol. 2

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Cover art by Fly

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JAKU CHARA TOMOZAKI-KUN LV.2

by Yuki YAKU

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Lv.2

Bottom-Tier CHARACTER TOMOZAKI

Characters

Fumiya Tomozaki

Second-year high school student. Bottom-tier.

Aoi Hinami

Second-year high school student. Perfect heroine of the school.

Minami Nanami

Second-year high school student. Class clown.

Hanabi Natsubayashi

Second-year high school student. Small.

Yuzu Izumi

Second-year high school student. Hot.

Fuka Kikuchi

Second-year high school student. Bookworm.

Takahiro Mizusawa

Second-year high school student. Wants to be a beautician.

Shuji Nakamura

Second-year high school student. Class boss.

Common Honorifics

In order to preserve the authenticity of the Japanese setting of this book, we have chosen to retain the honorifics used in the original language to express the relationships between characters.

No honorific: Indicates familiarity or closeness; if used without permission or reason, addressing someone in this manner would constitute an insult.

-*san*: The Japanese equivalent of Mr./Mrs./Miss. If a situation calls for politeness, this is the fail-safe honorific.

-*kun*: Used most often when referring to boys, this indicates affection or familiarity. Occasionally used by older men among their peers, but it may also be used by anyone referring to a person of lower standing.

-*chan*: An affectionate honorific indicating familiarity used mostly in reference to girls; also used in reference to cute persons or animals of either gender.

-*senpai*: An honorific indicating respect for a senior member of an organization. Often used by younger students with their upperclassmen at school.

1

The characters who become your friends after you clear a hard event usually have high stats

“Ha—you think it’s gonna be that easy, Hinami?”

It was three in the afternoon on a Sunday, the time of week when normies typically build relationships by going bowling or singing karaoke or doing other stuff with their friends.

I, on the other hand, was facing off with the TV screen in my room, muttering to myself with a controller gripped in my hands. Typical behavior for Tomozaki, world-class bottom-tier character. Yup, that’s me, and right now I was doing what I do best.

“Yeah, bam!”

As I put my geekiness on full display, Found—the ninja character that Hinami was controlling—went flying off the stage. Naturally, the game on the screen was *Attack Families*, aka *Atafami*.

“Ha-ha! Man, that felt good.”

With that, I won, and the score screen came up.

I’ve still never lost to Aoi Hinami, the perfect heroine of our high school, known to me as the up-and-coming gaming prodigy NO NAME. We’d played ten matches just today and probably fifty altogether so far. In other words, fifty wins, zero losses. I could practically see her frustrated scowl.

Of course, on the battlefield of real life, my score was still a big fat zero.

A chat message arrived from Hinami.

NO NAME: If you’re not too tired, how about one more?

Even in that short message, I could sense both her stubborn drive to win and that stoic determination that wouldn’t allow her to be happy until she’d beaten me at my best. Without meaning to, I smiled.

nanashi: Nothing gets you down, huh, NO NAME?

Same old Hinami. Sighing good-naturedly, I thought back on the previous day, when we met for lunch at an Italian place in Kitayono and went to see a movie together.

One thing I can say right off the bat is it didn't go how it was supposed to.

"Nope. When you say it like that, it feels like you're talking too much, or you're being sarcastic. Get it?"

"S-sarcastic?"

It was early afternoon, and the June heat was starting to get intense—the season was at that midpoint when spring warmth turns to summer mugginess. Hinami and I were sitting at an open-air café on the first floor of the mall.

"Try imagining yourself being a little more sincere, like you're just speaking your mind."

Wrapped in a calf-length coat made out of some material they'd sell at Muji, or a store like that, and gracefully cupping her chin in her palm, the perfect heroine with the bad mouth continued to instruct me. As nanashi, the top *Atafami* player but a noob at the game of life, all I could do was meekly obey.

"Um...so that part where the heroines jumped out of the car with their guns..."

But I was thinking about something else.

"Nope, try again. You still sound too lecture-y. Put more feeling into it."

"Feeling, huh...? Man, that one part! When the heroines jumped out of the car?"

This wasn't how it was supposed to go at all!

"Not bad, but I think you should use your hands more. Don't overdo it or anything, of course."

I mean, it took a lot of courage to ask her out. But as soon as the two of us left the theater, she goes, "So if you just saw a movie with a girl, how would you get a good conversation started? Give me a comment and don't forget the tone!" And all of a sudden, I was getting a full-on lesson.

"H-hands? ...The heroines! Jumped out of the car! ...Oh, come on, Hinami."

"What?"

I stopped midsentence, looked over at her, and told her what was bothering me. "Did you say yes when I asked you to see a movie just so you could give me this lesson?"

She blinked twice. "Obviously! What other reason would I have for seeing it?"

Better than a flat Duh, I guess. I sighed. "...Right."

Typical Hinami, I'll admit, but geez.

In other words, after I chewed out Erika Konno in the old principal's office, which had absolutely no lasting impact on our class—or it *seemed* like it didn't, at least on the surface—I asked Hinami to a movie without really meaning to. Our class might not have changed, but I had, just a little. That was all well and good, but then she went and treated it like one of our ordinary normie lessons. Yeah, Hinami-san is a tough one. And yeah, I'm a slow student.

That said, the only thing that's changed is that instead of thinking she's got a lousy personality and way too much confidence, I've come around to actually respecting her. She's pretty amazing, honestly. It really wasn't that much of a shock that our trip to the movies turned into a lesson instead of a date. *In fact, I think this is healthier, or at least better in the long run...right?*

“...Right?”

“Yeah... Wh-what?”

“What do you mean ‘what’? Are you even listening to me?”

The penetrating, powerful gaze from Hinami's big eyes met my own. Her beautiful hair swung lightly, tickling me as it brushed my cheek. *Damn she's close!*

“S-sorry! What were you saying?”

Without meaning to, I looked away. Just because I've always been bad at eye contact.

“Right now, you're practicing how to comment on a movie. When this is over, you're gonna practice how to respond when she tells you her thoughts on a movie. You know that, right? So hurry up and get it together so we can move on.”

“A-are you serious?”

“Obviously. Anyway, next...”

In her usual Spartan way, Hinami-san was taking the reins completely. I was starting to get embarrassed, so I decided to make a suggestion.

“First let me ask you something. Do you have time tomorrow?”

“Huh? What's with the sudden question? Listen, I have a lot to do. I can't give you all my attention for two full days...”

“*Atafami.*”

“What?”

I caught a glimpse of eagerness in her eyes when she flicked her gaze toward me. When it comes to *Atafami*, she's an open book.

“First to win ten matches. What do you say?”

“Bring it on.”

Yup, she's always ready to play.

That's how I ended up winning ten games in a row on Sunday. Man, that felt good.

Wait a second... Are Hinami's flaws contagious?

It was Monday, the start of another week. I was in our classroom before school started. Since we met on Saturday, Hinami and I had skipped our usual morning meeting.

“Hey, Tomozaki! Tomozaki!”

“Huh? Oh, Izumi.”

She’d come into the classroom a couple of minutes before homeroom began. Same old Izumi: smells great, kinda ditzy, huge boobs.

“Listen to this!”

“What’s up?”

“I think...I’ve got it perfectly memorized.”

Her tone was serious, almost grave. No doubt she was talking about the assignment I’d given her: memorizing all the moves for an *Atafami* match.

“Oh wow, seriously?”

“Seriously!”

Ever since the incident in the old principal’s office, I’d been navigating the subtly altered battlefield of school with slightly less of an inferiority complex.

“In that case, you really are gonna be able to play Nakamura soon.”

“Really?! ...Yay!”

Izumi did a little “here we go” pose. Wow, that was cute. She was so sincere and in love.

As you can see, I was actually able to have a normal conversation now. Okay, I admit, that was mostly because Izumi is a good conversationalist, and I was just following her lead. I hadn’t improved all that much. Plus, we were talking about *Atafami*, which was an easier topic for me.

That was why I decided to take the initiative and get myself some more EXP.

“That reminds me...”

“Huh? What?”

For me, every day is a day for special training. I selected one of my memorized conversation topics that I could use on Izumi.

“I heard Nakamura’s birthday is coming up.”

“...Yeah, it is, but why do you know that?! I mean, why did you say that to me?” Izumi sputtered, turning red. I guess talking directly about Nakamura is a little insensitive? *Hinami-san, what’s your verdict?*

“Oh, I don’t know... Ha-ha.”

“Don’t *Ha-ha* me! Anyway, his birthday isn’t for a month. That’s not exactly ‘coming up!’”

Come on, couldn't she find my flubs cute?

Still, I've improved compared to my old loner self. When I'm in class, I talk to Izumi about *Atafami* and other random stuff, and I talk to Mimimi and Tama-chan and Hinami in a group, too. My loner aura is gradually fading. That's kind of amazing.



Of course, if I think about it, being amazed by my own ability to talk to a couple people in class might be its own problem. I'll pretend not to notice that.

The problem is Erika Konno and her crew. It's like they're always saying stuff loud enough for me to hear, such as "What a freak!" or "That look in his eyes is so weird" or "It's hilarious how desperate he is!" like they're trying to hit me where it hurts. I'm sick of it. Aside from that, everything is peaceful.

Thinking about it more, though, I'm always hanging out with girls, which probably won't make me popular with the other guys. I wouldn't be surprised if they think I'm one of those types.

I was just thinking I'd better get some advice from Hinami on the subject when an incident occurred during the break before fourth period.

"Tomozaki."

"...Huh?"

An unfamiliar voice was saying my name. When I turned around, I found Mizusawa.

Mizusawa was one of the guys who's always hanging out with Nakamara. He was the one with the stylishly permed and dyed hair and the fresh, handsome face. Unlike Takei, the other core member of Nakamura's crew, Mizusawa was less like a hanger-on and more like a military advisor propping him up from the shadows. Back when everything went down with Mimimi and Tama-chan in home ec, that was the vibe I got.

"Uh, does someone want to see me again...?" I asked him in a low voice.

Mizusawa laughed loudly. "Chill out, dude! I'm just talking to you. Guess that doesn't happen to you much, huh?"

His tone was light. But while I felt relieved that Nakamura wasn't summoning me again, I was also bothered by the instability of my position. I guess at my level, people feel like they can call me "dude" whenever they feel like it.

"What do you mean you're just talking to me?"

"What do you think I mean? Listen, that was crazy the other day, huh?"

"The other day? You mean with Erika Konno?"

"Yeah!" Mizusawa cackled gleefully. "I've never seen anyone piss her off that bad."

"Sh-shut up, man!"

I didn't know what to say, but I tried to sound upbeat and comical. It's all about practice. Obviously, I've been practicing every

day so that I can maintain the energy in my tone and expression. But it doesn't work so great with higher-status people.

"Look, Tomozaki." For some reason, Mizusawa's expression was gentle. "Actually...it was a good thing."

"A good thing?"

I couldn't help sounding like an idiot.

"Yeah. It's like, you were saying what was really on your mind, right?"

I thought back on what I'd screamed at Konno in the old principal's office. Shit. It was a little embarrassing to be asked if those were my real feelings, but I nodded. They were.

"Yeah, guess so."

Weirdly enough, Mizusawa grinned. "Thought so! Like, okay, I wanna say this right. I'm not against what you did."

"...What?"

"Look, that kind of shit is usually too much for people. It's crazy. A lot of people would call you a freak for it...people like Konno. But me? I think it was awesome, and actually..."

He stopped talking, but I was so engrossed in his unexpected speech that I couldn't help prodding him on. "...Actually?"

"I agree with what you said. And I was kind of impressed that you were able to be so bold. I just wanted to tell you you've got people like me on your side."

"On my side?" Never had I once considered during my time in high school that someone might ever be on my side. Food for thought.

"Anyway, there's no real point I'm trying to make. Just, like, let's go grab a bite sometime with some people."

"Some people...?"

Those words struck me as sinister, but I tried to keep my tone upbeat when I said, "Okay!" I had Izumi in mind as my model. That light little "Okay!" of hers had a pleasant ring to it.

"Of course, Shuji wouldn't come."

"Oh right."

Maybe he'd planned to say that all along, or maybe he'd guessed how I was feeling, but Mizusawa's words casually swept away my concerns.

"Right? That wouldn't be cool, right, if Shuji was there?"

"Uh, well...I guess," I said vaguely.

"Listen, Tomozaki." Mizusawa looked at me gravely, then smirked. "It's funnier if you reply instantly. Like 'Yeah, no.'"

"...Oh, right."

As I stood there awed by the power of the normie, Mizusawa went on talking. "Right? Anyway, when I said some people..."

He smirked again and looked me in the eye.

“...I meant Aoi or someone.”

His choice caught me off guard.

“Oh yeah. Hinami,” I said, trying to sound calm enough to hide that he’d gotten to me.

“Yeah, you guys are tight lately, right? We’ll invite her and another girl and hang out. Sound good?”

“Yeah, that does sound fun.”

I flexed my face muscles to make myself smile casually.

“Right? Okay, dude, I’ll check in later.”

“Okay.”

As I fired off another Izumi-inspired “Okay,” it finally hit me that a lot of people had noticed Hinami and I were getting close. Mimimi and Izumi had said something about it, too. As I suspected, normies are incredibly good at noticing changes in human relationships...

Still, going out to eat together? Honestly, it was all so sudden that I felt kind of intimidated. But this kind of thing wouldn’t be that unusual for a normal high school student, right? Damn, high schoolers are incredible. They must be out doing stuff all the time.

Then again, going out to eat wasn’t such a big deal, and I’d be okay as long as Hinami was there, right? I didn’t want to be so dependent on her, though.

That same day, Mizusawa and I talked a little at lunch and again after school. He’s got a full-on normie aura. Of course, Mimimi and Izumi are normies, too, but everything about normie guys is intimidating. They’ve got this vibe that reminds you of where you are on the food chain—way scarier than normie girls. I was super nervous while we were talking. Hope I was at least getting some EXP out of it.

At the same time, well, I don’t know what’s gonna happen in the future, but it seems like this might develop into a sort of friendship with another guy in my class, and a normie at that, too. Can’t complain about that!

Plus, I’m kind of happy he agreed with the stuff I screamed at Konno.

* * *

“All righty, then. It’s been a while since we met here. Let’s get started.”

“Go easy on me, please.”

We were in Sewing Room #2 after school. It was the first time we’d met there since the incident in the old principal’s office. The familiar, dusty room felt oddly calming.

“First let’s go over your current goal. Do you remember what it is? The small one, I mean.” Hinami didn’t waste any time getting the

discussion going.

“Yeah, of course. To go out alone with a girl other than you, right?”

“Right.” She nodded.

“But the more I think about it, the scarier it seems.”

“And the more I hear your whining, the more I get tired of it,” Hinami retorted indifferently, stroking the ends of her beautiful silky black hair. As she recrossed her legs, I glimpsed the sunlight from the windows reflect off her inner thigh with a blinding white flash. She really is good-looking, including her figure.

“But what should I do? Do I just come up with a slick way to ask someone out?”

Hinami shook her head. “No, it’s better if it happens as the natural conclusion to a conversation. It’d be easy to achieve the goal if you just barreled ahead asking everyone out, after all.”

Not so easy for me, but anyway. “Gotta make it natural, huh?”

“Yeah. Plus, if you were to go out alone with someone right now, your skills are still so low that the conversation would probably dry up and the date would be a failure. You need to strengthen those skills first.”

“O-oh, okay. You mean conversation skills, right?”

“It’s not a problem you can solve overnight, but topic memorization is the answer. Are you keeping up with that?”

Memorization. In other words, building a stock of things to talk to people about. I’d been continuing with that even during these couple days when I hadn’t met with Hinami.

“Yeah.”

“I thought so. From what I’ve seen, you seem to be practicing.”

“From what you’ve seen?” I repeated, startled.

“You’ve been using the topics, right? For example, when you’re talking to me and Mimimi and Hanabi.”

“Oh, yeah.”

So that’s all she meant. When I’m talking with Izumi or Mimimi and Tama-chan and her, I try to find as many opportunities as possible to bring up the topics I’ve memorized. She can tell that simply by watching me.

“Keep up the good work. There’s a big difference between memorizing topics and using them in real conversations. The fact that you’re able to use them is a big step forward.”

“R-really?”

I didn’t know how to respond to the compliment.

“Of course, sometimes you’re so desperate to introduce a topic you come off as unnatural, or you give a big lead-in to something that ends up being trivial. Like you’ll go, ‘Hey, everyone, listen to this!’

That show on TV the other day...' That still needs some work."

Her words hit hard, especially given the unnecessary use of her acting skills to imitate my nerdy tone.

"I'll fix it..."

I trailed off into dejected silence. Hinami glanced at me with a satisfied smile. Was she getting even more sadistic than before?

"Well, it shouldn't be too hard, since the areas for improvement are clear. Next, I'd like to talk about our plan moving forward...but first, has anything changed lately?"

"Any changes... Oh." I remembered something. "Today I talked with Mizusawa about a bunch of stuff."

"Mizusawa? Now that you mention it, I did see you two talking a couple times."

"Yeah. That's why I wasn't able to go to the library before we changed classrooms today."

"I see... Well, there's not much you can do about that."

Hinami had instructed me to keep working on my ridiculous midrange goal—getting a girlfriend by the time we start our third year. As part of that, she's also been reminding me to keep talking to Kikuchi-san, my love interest, as much as possible.

"We switch classrooms on Mondays and Wednesdays, so I'm planning to go the day after tomorrow..."

"In that case, it doesn't matter. It might even be for the best. Anyway, what happened with Mizusawa?"

"Well, you know that whole mess with Konno? He told me he agreed with what I said to her, and he said we should go get a bite to eat sometime with some people. He said you should come, too, and another girl."

"...Huh. Mizusawa said that?"

Hinami knit her brows. Unusual behavior. Well, knitting her brows wasn't unusual in itself, but she rarely made that expression in response to something or someone other than me, especially when it was someone she seemed to be on decent terms with.

"What? Is something wrong?"

"Why?"

"Nothing, it's just..."

"It's not a big deal. Anyway, that might work out just about right."

She brought one finger to her lips as if she were deep in thought. I felt like she might be about to change the subject, but her expression stayed the same.

"What do you mean by 'just about right'?"

"Obviously what we were talking about a minute ago. Conversation skills. Or I should say, date skills. You should be able to

get in some good practice if we all go out.”

She seemed to be taking this in an entirely different direction.

“Practice, huh...? Well, it *would* be easy to practice if I was in a group with you and Mizusawa and one other person.”

“Right?”

I imagined the scenario: There I was, in a vaguely normie setting, feeling reassured because Hinami was sitting next to me.

Just as I was getting annoyed at myself for needing that reassurance, Hinami started talking again. “Plus, you can practice asking someone out, in addition to talking with them on a date.”

“Huh? Asking someone out?”

Uh-oh, I see where this is going.

“Yeah. You’re going to invite the other girl. Obviously.”

“...Figures.”

Well, I guess that’s how it works. In the game of life, the harsh training just doesn’t stop.

* * *

To summarize the rest of our meeting, here’s what we decided:

My job was to choose who to invite, taking into consideration the relationships between myself, Hinami, and Mizusawa. Once I decided, I would have to think about the best way to invite her and then actually do it.

In other words, the choosing, thinking, and inviting were all up to me. A one-man play starring Fumiya Tomozaki. Everything depended on me. *Is it safe to leave so much up to me? Or maybe it’s a test? Kind of like how lions drop their cubs over the edge of a cliff to see which one can climb back up? Only thing is, I’m more of a mosquito larva than a lion cub. Wonder if that’s gonna be a problem.*

In the end, though, if expert player Hinami-san is telling me to do it, I don’t have much of a choice. I might find it frustrating, but I don’t think she’s way off the mark. Meaning it won’t do for the top gamer nanashi, aka Fumiya Tomozaki, to cut corners.

With those thoughts in my head, I headed home and started my solitary reflection.

Number one. Who to invite?

I didn’t struggle too much over this one. The list of girls I could invite was basically limited to Mimimi, Tama-chan, Izumi, and Kikuchi-san. Kikuchi-san would be tough both in terms of personality and the group she hung out with. Tama-chan didn’t seem well suited to that kind of situation, either. After all, she almost got herself into big trouble the other day in home ec. Even if Nakamura wasn’t there, I didn’t think it would work.

That left Mimimi and Izumi. Of the two, Izumi probably had a stronger connection to Mizusawa. She belonged to Erika Konno's group, which was closely tied to Nakamura's.

Given that, I tentatively settled on Izumi.

With her in mind, I moved on to point two: how to invite her.

I was expecting this to be the hardest part, but it was surprisingly easy. Among the conversation topics I'd prepared based on information from Hinami, one stood out as especially promising. Actually, it was one I'd already brought up with Izumi.

I heard Nakamura's birthday is coming up.

Basically, I'd use that as the pretext for inviting her. More specifically, I'd tell her: "You're probably not sure what to get Nakamura for his birthday, right? You should ask Mizusawa! You guys are friends anyway. And Hinami seems like she's good at that kind of thing, too. You should come with us! Wait a second... Guess you don't really need me in this operation!" I'll admit I thought it was a damn good plan.

The next morning, I laid it all out for Hinami when we met in Sewing Room #2.

"...Well, if that's what you want to do, go ahead. Is that your final decision?"

Her reply was a little loaded, but she gave me her approval. She refused to elaborate when I asked her what she meant, so I can't say what was up, but I decided to go with it. When I asked Hinami about my one concern—whether Izumi would get Nakamura a present in the first place—she said chances were nearly a hundred percent that she would. She added that she probably hadn't bought one yet since his birthday was still a month off. Which left me with just one option: Go for it.

* * *

So there I was in our classroom on the day I had to invite Izumi. But...

Before I did that, my first hurdle was telling Mizusawa I was going to invite her. If I didn't, he'd think I was randomly inviting someone without asking him, and he might have already invited someone else. It was the polite thing to do. Or so Hinami told me, adding, "Normie or not, shouldn't that have occurred to you?" She looked totally annoyed. I didn't give up, though. I'm way too used to her harsh comments for that. I did file that bit of knowledge away for next time, though.

With that in mind, I headed into morning homeroom. I was planning to approach Mizusawa when he got to class. He usually got there before Nakamura, so I aimed for that window of opportunity.

“Mizusawa.”

Surprised at how smoothly I’d been able to say his name, I waited for his response. Normally I’d have stuttered for sure. Not bad, Tomozaki.

“Huh? Oh, hey, Tomozaki! Why so serious?”

“S-serious?”

“Anyway, what’s up? Are you nervous about something? Relax, dude!”

Grinning, Mizusawa thumped my shoulders. Apparently, I was so nervous he could see it in my face. Not so good after all, Tomozaki. Whatever, that’s me. Onward!

“Oh, no, I just wanted to ask you about getting something to eat, like we were talking about the other day.”

“Oh yeah, that.”

“You were saying it’d be me and you and Hinami and one more person.”

“Yeah, sounds about right.”

“I was thinking of inviting Izumi. Wh-what do you think?”

It was clear I was testing the waters; Mizusawa peered into my eyes like he was trying to read something there. Guess I should have said it a little more naturally and confidently?

“...Yeah, I guess that’s fine.”

“Really? Th-then I’ll invite her later.”

He hardly waited for me to finish before he said, “Listen, dude.” Then he smirked. “You’re up to something, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

He pointed accusingly at my head. “I’ve been suspicious for a while now! That haircut—you started going to a salon instead of a barber recently, didn’t you? You’re wasting a good cut by not styling it.”

Once again, he’d caught me totally off guard. “Y-you can tell?”

“Obviously!” he said, touching my hair. “...They really did a nice job, too. I’m planning to be a beautician, so I’m a harsh critic.”

“Huh.”

So that was his deal. Since I wasn’t a normie, that was the best response I could come up with. I reflexively looked away. My embarrassment didn’t stop him from ruffling my hair.

“Look, you’ve always been kind of a loser, but suddenly you start going to the salon, you’re buddies with Aoi and Mimimi and Izumi, and you’re acting way more upbeat! And to top it all off, you’re gonna invite Izumi yourself? Don’t tell me that’s all a coincidence.”

“Uh...”

I was panicking because he'd hit the nail right on the head, but at the same time, I was kinda glad he noticed I was more upbeat.

“So basically, you're on a campaign to fix your reputation, aren't you? But you're way too gung ho. I mean, it's hard to imagine you're coming up with all these ideas on your own. Something's going on, isn't it?”

“Uh, n-no, not particularly.”

Mizusawa was rattling off his points like a motivational speaker, declaring everything as fact, with accompanying hand gestures. Even as I marveled at his powers of deduction and communication, I was internally panicking. If he figured out Hinami's role in everything, that was a worst-case scenario.

“I know what you're up to, dude...”

I waited in silence for Mizusawa's verdict. He pointed straight at my face.

“...You've been reading one of those books on how not to be a geek!!”

For the second time in two weeks, I was being accused of following the advice in one of those books. He was insulting my dignity just like my sister had.

* * *

Lunch period rolled around, and everyone started putting away their books and other stuff. That was when I planned to invite Izumi.

After Mizusawa finished his deductive tour de force, which turned out to be harmless, he'd said, “It's totally fine if you invite Izumi. Good luck, dude!” With his moral support as well as his permission secured, I had to go through with it. I wanted to take a second to pull myself together, but when I glanced to my left, Izumi was right there, which made that impossible. This was the downside of sitting next to her. By the way, not saying anything until lunch wasn't part of my strategy—I was just running behind schedule because I was so nervous.

Still, I'd planned out my speech and played it in my head a bunch of times, and I'd put in some solid practice on my delivery and phrasing, too, so it shouldn't be that hard.

Of course, I knew getting too comfortable could set me up for a fall. I'd made that mistake too many times, so I wasn't letting myself feel overly confident. *Here I go!*

“Izumi.”

“Hmm?”

Her round eyes turned toward me without the slightest shade of anything unkind in her expression. Come on, what’s with those beautiful eyes? I ought to be grateful for her good intentions. But that’s not what this is about.

“Um, remember we were talking about Nakamura’s birthday coming up soon?”

“That again?! It’s not soon! It’s still a ways off!”

Izumi turned a very noticeable shade of red as she protested furiously. Suppressing the desire to ask her what exactly counted as “not soon” versus “a ways off,” I continued with my speech.

“Okay, but you’re going to buy him a present, right?”

“Yeah, I probably will... What are you getting at?”

Izumi fanned her face with both hands to cool off. *Good luck with that!* Anyway, now I was sure that she planned to buy him a present, but she hadn’t yet. Onward!

“Actually, Mizusawa and Hinami and I were talking about going out to eat, and we wanted to invite one more person...”

“Uh-huh. And you were thinking of asking me?”

I continued with my script, as outgoing as I could manage.

“Yeah, pretty much. And...you’re going to get Nakamura a present, right? Well, Mizusawa is close with him, and I thought maybe you could ask him what you should buy.”

“Good point!”

Izumi clapped and looked at me with satisfaction, like she was following my line of thinking.

“Hinami seems pretty good at that kind of thing, too, so...I was thinking we could all go shopping for it together.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t want to make you guys do that!”

“Huh?”

Make us do it? My mind ground to a halt after this little curveball.

“You guys are planning to eat out, right? I wouldn’t want to drag everyone along on my personal shopping trip.”

She waved her hands energetically. That’s when I realized what was going on. This was just Izumi’s personality.

Even though she belonged to Erika Konno’s group, which was at the top of the class hierarchy, she was hyperaware of the general mood of a conversation and cared a lot about what other people thought of her. She was good at doing things for others and being considerate. The flip side was that she was bad at letting other people do things for her. It was like that saying about monks being bad at combat. If you’ve got a strength, then its opposite is likely to be your weak point. Maybe.

If that was true, then she probably didn’t like getting favors

without giving anything in return. Darn, I screwed this up. *How do I fix it?* I'd hate if she turned down the invitation because of this.

"You shouldn't worry about it! It wouldn't be a problem at all!"

"Really? But...is everyone else going to buy presents for Shuji, too?"

Uh, were we? We hadn't mentioned anything about that. Probably shouldn't outright lie about it...

"I—I don't know."

"Thought so! I'll go if everyone else is going to buy him a present, too!"

She was offering a compromise, but I got the feeling this was basically a no. *Shit, what do I do?* She was avoiding a definite answer, which meant I might have to ask her again. That idea definitely didn't appeal to me, which made me want to keep insisting until she made up her mind here and now. Was that evasion or aggression?

"Um, but I really don't think you need to worry about it..."

"Really?"

"...Okay, how do I put this?"

"What?"

I wasn't being clear anymore, and Izumi was getting more and more confused. This was not good.

Just as I was thinking I had to figure out something quick...I had a flash of inspiration.

Was it really a good idea? I wasn't sure, but in my panic, I just spit it out on pure momentum.

"I'm gonna buy him one, too."

"Huh?" Izumi froze.

"I'm gonna buy Nakamura a present, too."

"...What?"

She looked at me like she had no idea what I was talking about. Of course she didn't. If a carbon copy of me were listening to our conversation, he'd probably be even more confused than Izumi right now. Why the hell would I buy Nakamura a present? We were more like enemies than friends.

I had to recover the ball and find an excuse.

"It's just... I want to patch things up," I said, grasping at straws.

"Patch things up?"

Izumi's eyes lit up a little.

Wait, what was she expecting? I continued apprehensively. "I mean, things got weird the other day, but since we both like *Atafami*, I think we should make up... Nakamura is really into *Atafami* now, right? Plus, going by what happened the other day, he's not a bad guy. I bet we could be friends..."

The excuses came with surprising ease. Wonder why. Had I gained

some skills?

"Anyway, I was thinking maybe his birthday would be a good opportunity..."

When I'd finished explaining, Izumi gaped at me. Then, after a brief silence, she broke into a huge grin.

"That's awesome!!"

She put both hands on my shoulders and shook me violently. *What the heck?* My head flailed back and forth.

"That's awesome! I love it, Tomozaki! I was actually feeling kind of weird about all this. I mean, you know I'm...friends with Shuji, right?! And lately I've been talking to you a lot, too. So I was thinking, like, both of you are good guys, and both of you are friends with me, so I didn't want you to be, like, in a fight! Oh, s-sorry."

Suddenly realizing what she was doing, she removed her hands from my shoulders. Meanwhile, my heart filled with emotion upon hearing Izumi call me her friend. And please don't say she was just being polite.

"O-oh..."

"Plus, it sucks when your friends are fighting, right? So I'd be really happy if two of my friends could be friends with each other! It's just more fun that way! Uh, sorry if I'm being weird about this; I just think it would be so great!"

"Um, y-yeah, that's what I thought, too!"

Her beautiful, saintly speech sounded like a girl in love blasting me with her true feelings. What was this? Light?

Even though it was obvious she was wearing makeup, and she wore her school uniform all sexy, her heart was so pure. And her boobs were so big... Okay, no, you can't think stuff like that in the presence of a saint.

"I'll help you! We'll go present shopping together!"

As I was thinking irrelevant thoughts, the conversation took a weird turn. Still, she was accepting my invitation, so all's well that ends well, right...?

"Oh, uh... Um, thank you!"

With that, the "Grand Strategy to Get Nakamura a Present; Oops, Tomozaki Wasn't Even Needed" had suddenly turned into the "Grand Strategy to Reconcile Nakamura and Tomozaki."

After school, I told Hinami what had happened.

"...So anyway, I managed to invite her."

Once again, Hinami's response was loaded. "Good job. But I'll ask you one more time. Are you sure this is what you want?"

"What do you mean? I was wondering about that the other day, too."

“Well, you and Mizusawa had originally planned to go out to eat.”

“Yes, and...?”

Oh yeah. I guess the plan did change to shopping.

“I feel like you’d realize this if you thought about it at all, but there’s a big difference between sitting somewhere and talking while you eat, and walking around to a bunch of places shopping. Shopping is going to be way harder for someone at your level.”

“...Oh.”

She was right. If we were just eating, as long as Hinami was there, the conversation would be fine, and there wouldn’t be much else to think about, so I could relax. But if we went shopping...I’d have to think about what to buy, what to say about what other people bought, where to stand, what to look at, and... Ugh, way too many things I didn’t know how to do.

“I can tell you didn’t think about any of that.” Hinami sighed.

“B-but if I didn’t say I was getting a present, she wouldn’t have said yes.”

“Normally, if someone says they feel bad about making everyone come shopping, you say, ‘Then let’s just go eat,’ right?”

“Oh...”

Hinami looked down, shaking her head and sighing.

Looks like I just raised the difficulty.

* * *

The evening after our meeting, I was eating dinner with my family.

According to the master, it would be weird for me to organize everything, not to mention too much for me to handle anyway, so she was going to take over.

I was enjoying that sense of relief as I ate. My sister was sitting next to me and my mom was across from us, but my mom ate only a few bites before going into the kitchen to start cleaning up. She was on a mini diet where she didn’t eat much at night. Still a go-getter in her late thirties. My dad was at work, so he wasn’t eating with us.

My sister and I were staring at the TV and eating in silence when my phone started buzzing in my pocket. I figured it was for some e-mail newsletter.

“Huh.”

When I pulled it out, there was a notification from a messaging app saying, “You’ve been invited to join a group.” What was going on? I’d never seen something like that before. Invited?

When I tapped on it, an invitation to a sort of chat room called “Pre-B-Day Strategy Group” popped up, and I had to either accept or decline.

“...What is this?”

Hinami must have created the chat room—there was a notification saying, “Aoi Hinami-san has invited you to join this group.” Apparently it was possible to view the other members, so I tapped on that button and the names Takahiro and Yuzu-san popped up as “invited.” Yuzu-san must be Izumi, which meant Takahiro was Mizusawa.

This was the first time I’d been invited to something like this, but I imagined it was a group chat to figure out our plans for shopping. The messaging app probably had a system for that, which Hinami, our event organizer, had used. Impressive deduction skills, huh? Just don’t mention how I didn’t know all this stuff to start with. At least I can figure it out.

As I glanced back at my phone, I noticed that Yuzu-san’s status had changed from “invited” to “joined.” Ooh, the action here’s in real time. She must have noticed the invitation and decided to accept on the spot. Just what I’d expect from a normie like Izumi. No hesitation whatsoever when it comes to joining social circles.

I was about to tap “accept,” too...but I get nervous about stuff like this. Even though Hinami was the one who had made the group and Izumi and Mizusawa already knew about the plan to go shopping, I was weirdly uncomfortable, like maybe I shouldn’t be there. Must be because I’m not one of them.

As I was staring at my phone and agonizing over what to do, an unpleasant voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Hey, stop talking to yourself so loudly. People are trying to eat here.”

My sister was glowering at me. When I looked back at her, she turned her head away and started eating again. *She sure is full of herself for someone who’s not even here for dinner most of the time.*

“Chill out.”

“Pfft. What, are you playing a porn game or something?”

“Hey! I don’t play those. Believe me.”

“Ugh. I wasn’t even being serious.”

She glared at me with a look halfway between an absent stare and disgust.

“Hey, what’s that...? LINE? You’re on LINE?”

She must have glimpsed the screen on my phone in the process of glaring at me, because she suddenly sounded surprised.

“...Yeah, and?”

“Huh. Weird.” She sounded unhappy about this for some reason, and she kept glancing over at me as she ate.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

"No, what?" I insisted.

"I just thought it was unusual for you to be on LINE," she huffed. "And that's a group message, isn't it?"

"Yeah..."

"What, you got invited to some weird group you don't want to join?" For once, my sister took the initiative and continued the conversation. Normally she was like, *Hi, bye!*

"It's not weird, but...I don't know. Joining just doesn't feel right."

"Huh."

With that uninterested response, she turned away and started absently watching TV again while she ate. *Geez, you're the one who asked.*

I didn't care all that much, though, so I went back to my dinner, too.

"...Well, that does happen sometimes."

"Huh?"

She was looking up at me. What was she trying to say?

"I mean, it's like, sometimes you get invited to join a group and you feel awkward about it, but you still have to join."

"Huh."

So that's what she meant. This was a new experience for me, but apparently it wasn't that unusual. What was unusual was that my sister and I were actually talking about a shared topic of interest.

"Could be, but it's still super awkward."

"Huh."

She suddenly started acting bored again and went back to ignoring me in favor of her dinner. What was with her?

Slightly hurt by her rudeness, I started eating again, too.

"...Are they your new friends or something?"

"Huh?"

She glanced at me again as she asked her weirdly timed question. What was she up to?

"I'm *asking* if you made some new friends and decided to make a group chat together."

She pouted, glancing sidelong at me. I didn't get it.

But seriously, how long had it been since we had a real conversation like this? We'd never had anything in common. And now she was talking about the awkward side of making friends?

I really wasn't expecting this. She was a fairly solid member of the in-crowd, and she always seemed cheerful and happy without thinking about things too much. Still, I guess even she worried about these LINE groups sometimes. If that was true, how long would it be before I could get through a day without worrying about this stuff?

"No, it's like, I don't know. I just got to know these people

recently, and they're all fairly popular. I'm just hesitant to join their group, or...nervous, I guess? That's all."

"Yeah, I know where you're coming from. That stuff is so annoying."

She shrugged melodramatically. She got peeved like that sometimes. Still, she seemed kind of off today. Maybe something had happened recently that was bugging her? I thought I'd try asking.

Okay, EXP might have been a minor consideration, but I was also her big brother, y'know?

"You having any trouble with your friends or people in your class?"

She looked surprised for a second, then sighed with exasperation and eyed me with a condescending sort of pity. "If I was, would you have any good advice for me?" She gave me an appraising look.

"Da..."

I couldn't even say "damn." Humiliating. Would I ever be able to hold my own in a battle with my sister, the normie in my own family?

With a silent groan, I joined Aoi's group. It was like my sister said; this inner conflict over accepting the invitation was stupid.

In a couple minutes, the discussion started, and we decided to go shopping on the coming Saturday. Not much time...

* * *

The next day was Wednesday. I was in morning homeroom when our teacher, Ms. Kawamura, made an announcement.

"Okay, so I handed out an explanation about this already, but next, uh...Tuesday, the campaign period starts for student council elections. All right? Third-year students will be taking their university entrance exams, so starting next month, the first- and second-year students will be in charge. If you want to run, you gotta get an application from me this week. You'll need a campaign manager, and you'd better choose that person carefully. The forms are due next Monday, guys."

Ms. Kawamura had a distinctive way of talking, and this time was no exception. She was no pushover—she was already head teacher for our grade level, even though she was on the young side. Her whole personality was distinctive, really. She was super pretty, too.

So it was time for student elections again. Now that I thought about it, I remembered the election being around this time last year. Of course, last year I was a first-year student, and none of my classmates were pushy enough to be like *I'm gonna be student council president!* all of a sudden. The elections were totally uneventful. I don't think any first-years ran, not even Hinami, if I remember correctly.

She must have decided the downsides would outweigh the benefits.

When homeroom ended, everyone started chatting noisily. I stayed in my seat and watched Hinami absently. She slipped away from the normie group with ease and got a paper from Ms. Kawamura. Figures. Must be an application to run. She swept the field in just about every arena, so why would she let such an obvious chance to be number one slip by?

Which reminded me, Ms. Kawamura had said something about campaign managers. Each candidate needed one, I think. I couldn't really remember the details, but I was fairly sure they had to give a speech last year. As long as no one popular runs, no one really cares about the student council elections. *Wonder who Hinami'll choose.*

As all these thoughts were running through my head, I noticed Hinami glancing toward me. She smiled a little, then looked away. She returned to her seat, slipped the paper into a plastic folder, and put it in her bag.

Uh, does this mean what I'm thinking? A shiver of dread ran through me.

"Morning, Tomozaki!"

An overly perky greeting reached my ears.

"Whoa!"

Practically falling out of my seat, I turned around to see Mimimi. As usual, her figure was way too attractive, her face was way too pretty, and she was way too energetic.

"Why are you staring at Aoi? Got a crush?"

She giggled and sidled up to me. I shrank back.

"N-no, I don't have a c—"

"Aha! So you don't deny you were looking at her!"

"Hey, wait a second..."

She was setting the pace, and I was scrambling to deny her accusations. She looked away, rested her chin in her hand like a detective, and turned her gaze to the front.

"...Yup, looks like she's gonna run." Her eyes were on Hinami.

"For student council?"

"Yup!"

Guess Mimimi saw her get the paper, too.

"Well, this is Hinami we're talking about... Of course she'll run."

"Oh. You think so?"

There was a hint of gravity in her voice.

"Huh? Oh, well, she's number one in everything. I just assumed she'd go for this, too."

"...So true! She really is perfect at everything!"

Mimimi paused for a second, like she was thinking about something, then laughed a little too hard. What was that pause for? I

was curious, but I couldn't think of a natural way of asking, and given all the stops and starts when I try talking to people, I had no room to comment. For the moment, I focused on how to move the conversation forward without any more pauses.

Um, perfect? Well, maybe if she wasn't so rude...

"Ha-ha-ha, she really is perfect," I said, agreeing. It wasn't a lie, after all.

"What I'm wondering is...who is Aoi going to pick as her campaign manager?"

"Yeah..." I thought back to the bad feeling I had a minute earlier. "Yeah, that is the big question."

"Whoever Aoi chooses will be the center of attention, huh?"

"Y-yeah, the center of attention..." I agreed, all the while sensing my dread grow.

"In one sense, it would be an honor, but in another, it would be, like, a really big job..."

"A-a big job..." As dread turned to certainty, all I could do was nod.

"You definitely wouldn't want to mess that one up... Oh, here comes the teacher! See ya!" With that, Mimimi returned to her seat.

Attention, responsibility, a high price for failure. Yeah, that would sum it up.

As I prayed my hunch was wrong, I thought about how we had class in another room today, which meant I absolutely had to talk to Kikuchi-san, and then on Saturday I was going shopping with the normies, and...I had so much on my mind, I didn't know what to tackle first. For the moment I decided to empty my mind and just get ready for first period. Ah, enlightenment.

Before long, break time after third period had arrived.

After returning from the realm of enlightenment to the real world, I headed for the library. Needless to say, I wasn't going there to plan *Atafami* strategies this time. I was going to talk to Kikuchi-san.

This would be the first time meeting her one-on-one after fessing up to my lie about reading Michael Andi's books. I mean, she sat behind me in class, and we'd even talked a little, but there was a difference between seeing her in class and meeting here in the library. You know how you can sometimes get an elemental boost from the field? Well, Kikuchi-san's attractiveness would get a boost when she was around books.

"...Ah!"

When I came into the library, for some reason walking very slowly and quietly, Kikuchi-san noticed me right away and looked toward me. I was sure those eyes could dispel any negative status effects all

on their own. She smiled kindly at me before looking down at her book. The library was as quiet and calming as a temple.

I walked slowly toward her, feeling slightly embarrassed as that little smile reminded me of the one from a week ago. I pulled out the chair next to her, scooched it the tiniest bit closer to her than last time, and sat down.



“Hello.” Turning toward me with the calmness and loving kindness of Mother Mary, she greeted me with a voice as gentle as a fairy plucking a harp.

“H-hello,” I replied, flustered.

“Planning more strategies?” She was so pure, almost childlike.

“Uh, no, nope. Today I was...”

“...Yes?”

Hugging her book to her chest like a woodland squirrel holding nuts, she tipped her head inquisitively to the side. The trees outside the library window chose that moment to wave softly in the wind, and personally, I don’t think it was a coincidence.

I’d planned to be honest that I’d come specifically to talk with her, but faced with a magic so powerful it could even move the trees and flowers, I couldn’t possibly pull off such an over-the-top stunt.

“Um...I was interested in that book we were talking about the other day...”

I stood up, walked over to the bookshelf near us, and pulled out a book. It was the same one I always pretended to read while I was planning *Atafami* strategies. The book that led Kikuchi-san to mistakenly think I was a Michael Andi fan.

For the first time, I took in the title of my favorite prop. *The Masked Pilot and the Fairy of Truth*.

“...And I thought I’d try reading it for real.”

Her eyes sparkling like the legendary jewels that open the door to heaven, she raised her eyebrows in surprise and then smiled like a typical teenage bookworm.

“Oh, that would be great...!”

“Whew...I’m glad to hear you say that.”

I smiled back at her (I didn’t even have to think about how!), inched my chair a tiny bit closer to her, and sat back down.

The soft sound of two people turning the pages of their books filled the library, accompanied by the shuffling of feet. Neither of us said a word; we just followed the words on the page. We were reading different books by Michael Andi, but I felt like we were traveling together through the same world, understanding one another bit by bit as time flowed by like a calm and gentle river.

It was all so tranquil, I could hardly imagine that in three days I would be out shopping with three normies. Which is to say, I didn’t want that day to come. I wanted to stay in this moment forever.

2

**When there's only one low-level character in the party,
his level is gonna skyrocket**

Hinami and I were the first to arrive at our meeting place, the Bean Tree sculpture in Omiya Station.

Which is to say, she'd told me to come early.

"Oh man, here we go..."

"What, you're going to start whining already? Pull yourself together!"

"Come on! Two guys and two girls are about to go shopping, and on top of that, everyone aside from me knows how to do this stuff. If anything, *you're* the weird one for telling me not to be nervous..."

"We were *supposed* to go out to eat. Who's the one who made this harder on himself, again?"

"Uh..."

I couldn't say much to that. Hinami grinned triumphantly.

I looked around. People of all ages, including lots of young people, were waiting by the Bean Tree. Unlike me, all of them looked full of energy. They probably all had friends or dates like normal people do, and I bet none of them was nervous about waiting to meet someone... Man, Saitama Prefecture has its fair share of fashion-forward normies...

"For now, just focus on staying calm enough to work on your assignment."

Apparently, Hinami could see straight into my mind. As usual, she'd given me an assignment to complete while we were out shopping. Pretty tough.

"Damn, you guys are early."

As I stared off into the distance, Mizusawa arrived. I'm sure I was the only one who noticed Hinami's facial muscles suddenly activating.

"Ooh, Takahiro's late!"

"It's not even time yet!"

"Are you suuuure?"

Hinami was getting playful with Mizusawa. They were being tongue-in-cheek, but since they trusted each other, it was still fun, and fun to watch.

Mizusawa was wearing a white branded hoodie, dark jeans, and red shoes. His expression, the silhouette of his brown hair, the slimness of his torso, and the red shoes all added to the strength of his aura as a normie. Nope, I'm not gonna win this one.

Meanwhile, Hinami—who was chatting pleasantly by his side—was also dressed stylishly. Or maybe it wasn't her clothes so much as her aura. Anyway, she looked like a celebrity, as she always did. She was wearing dark green wide-leg pants (I think they're called?) rolled up just to the ankle, white sandals, and on top, a white airy...T-shirt, I guess? Actually, I don't know what it was, but something airy. I'm not that good at identifying different types of clothes.

I'm wearing the mannequin outfit I bought the other day. At least I know what to say about my own clothes now.

"Hey, I don't wanna hear about being late from you, Hinami! You were late the other day!"

"I was? Really? I forgot!"

"Well, I didn't."

They laughed in unison. Their conversation was totally casual, but I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. Aoi Hinami was late? In what parallel universe?

"S-sorry!!"

Sinking into my own thoughts, I'd completely logged out of the conversation when Izumi approached. I checked the clock. She was about two minutes late. She was running at full speed.

"Yuzu, watch out! You're going to trip!" Hinami said, laughing happily.

I looked at her feet. *I guess those are heels?* They were black and fairly high. She had on a pair of torn jean shorts, and her long, slender legs in them were incredibly sexy. Since the shorts were really short, they offered a generous view of her toned, silky smooth (as far as I could tell) thighs. On top, she had on something black and rather low cut that closer inspection revealed to be see-through at the midriff. Under that, I could make out a similarly low-cut white...something. She had on a necklace, too. She looked surprisingly grown-up, like a sexy woman who likes loud fashion choices. Ironical, given she acts like a kid.

But huh. I guess if you're running, people will forgive you for being late or even think it's cute and silly. It made her seem innocent or something... Oh.

I suddenly realized something. That was probably...

"You're late, missy! I was gonna treat you, but not anymore!"

"What?! ...O-okay, I get it!"

"No, no, no, don't worry about it! Anyway, let's go!"

Mizusawa seemed to find Izumi incredibly cute right then. It was

like she needed protection, like you couldn't just leave her to her own devices. In other words...Hinami had been late on purpose the other day in order to produce the same effect.

Seriously? Yeah. I can say that for sure because I've seen parts of who she really is that I'd rather forget. She'd never be late by mistake, and if it was on purpose, that's gotta be why.

"I'm ready!"

As the true terror of Aoi Hinami sent a chill down my spine, our shopping expedition began. Wait a second... Had I said a single word since Mizusawa and Izumi arrived?

The first place we headed was the Lumine mall near the Bean Tree.

I had no idea why we were going there—Mizusawa had just said, "So Tomozaki and Izumi are buying presents, right? How about Lumine to start with?" Must be because they have a lot of different stuff.

Right inside the building—which apparently was called Lumine 2—there was a stylish clothing store called Beams, and that was where we went. I have no idea why we chose Beams. Maybe because they have a lot of stuff? I know nothing.

"Hmmmmmm..."

As soon as we went into the store, Izumi started eyeing the various bags and wallets and other accessories disdainfully, humming very pointedly as she did. Hinami followed alongside, looking over the displays, until she gave a soft yelp.

"Ooh, this is cute!"

"Ooh, you're right! But do you think Shuji would like it?"

Picking up the tan coin pouch, Izumi looked uncertainly at Hinami.

Hinami tilted her head. "Yeah, I dunno."

"Hey, Hiro," Izumi called, "what do you think?" Apparently, she calls Mizusawa "Hiro."

"Not really his style."

"Yeah, you're right."

Izumi dejectedly returned the pouch to its shelf. She looked genuinely disappointed, but she started scanning the displays again with renewed determination. I could tell she was thinking very seriously about Nakamura as she tried to find something. She was frowning intently, but somehow, she still looked silly and fickle. Yet at the same time incredibly focused. Who was this girl in front of me?

But what about me? Just staring at everyone else wouldn't get me anywhere, and Hinami would yell at me for it later, so I knew I had to take action soon. I timidly crept up to Izumi.

She turned her head and looked me in the eye, dead serious. What?

She parted her lips. "I just don't know..."

"Th-that's it?" It was anticlimactic to find that was all that lay behind her grave expression.

"What do you think he'd like...?" she asked.

"Uh, um..."

Izumi was asking for my opinion just like she had everyone else's, and I appreciated that she didn't discriminate. The only problem was that I had nothing whatsoever of use to say.

Still, I'd give it my best shot. Incidentally, I have no idea what Nakamura wears when he's not in school, and almost no idea about his tastes or even his personality, really. All I know is that he's into *Atafami* right now and that he kinda hates losing.

I concluded that I'd better start with what I knew about him, or else I wouldn't be able to say anything at all. Yup, I was screwed. Time for the old fallback—saying what I was thinking.

"Uh, well, if I don't know what to buy someone, I don't usually get any ideas by just wandering around stores like this. It's better to, like, think about what you know about Nakamura. After you come up with an idea of what kind of present to buy him, then you start looking at a bunch of stuff. That's the only way to do it, at least I think it is..."

My voice trailed off as my confidence ran out, but Izumi murmured encouragingly and looked earnestly at me all the same, and when I was done, she was kind enough to say, "You're right!" very enthusiastically. *You're okay now, Izumi? You're not going to buy any of this crap?*

"Thanks! I think I'll ask some questions about him!"

With that, she started to peer around. She was probably searching for Mizusawa or Hinami. Have you ever noticed how weirdly smooth normie movements are? She was mysteriously still, even though she was scouring the store. Eventually, she spotted them at a distance. "Ah!"

For some reason, though, she tapped my cheek. When I turned toward her, she leaned in close to my ear. *What is this about? Damn her face is close. How many times are you going to do this?*

"Look over there!"

I looked where she was pointing. Mizusawa and Hinami were chatting like the best of friends as they took turns placing hats on each other's head... And?

"You mean they're getting along?"

I wasn't sure why Izumi was looking at me with an extremely excited, scheming look in her eye.

"Well...actually—oh, this is a secret, okay?"

"Oh, yeah, okay." I hunched over, and her mouth approached my ear.

"I heard they're dating," she whispered.

"What?!" I shouted.

"Quiet, stupid!" Izumi hissed.

Apparently, my practice in quick responses had borne fruit; it was a perfect dramatic reaction. Great! Now the salespeople and Mizusawa and Hinami were all staring at me. Less great.

Izumi waved her hands back and forth as if to say nothing fishy was going on, but the two of them were still suspicious, and they started walking toward us with little half-smiles on their faces.

"I'll tell you the rest later!"

"Uh, okay...", I whispered.

"It's nothing!" Izumi said, going up to Hinami and Mizusawa. And me? I was standing rooted to the ground with Izumi's words echoing in my head.

I heard they're dating.

So they're dating. Makes sense. Aoi Hinami's the perfect heroine; of course she has a boyfriend. Yeah, it would be weird if she was up on her high horse making me get a girlfriend when she wasn't seeing anyone herself. It's obvious now.

But something doesn't sit right. I'm kinda...angry. Maybe because Izumi was being so vague, like she just heard a rumor somewhere. Izumi and Hinami are close, so Izumi could just ask her straight out. Why hasn't she? I guess that's it.

Anyway, it didn't have anything to do with me directly, so I didn't mind, but something seemed off about this. I don't like not having the full story. It's like if someone says, "Hey, I've got a secret... No, never mind!" That's annoying, right? This wasn't because it was Hinami; it was just annoying in general.

"Tomozaki-kun! We're leaving!"

"Oh right!!"

Hinami was calling me. Once again, I reacted exaggeratedly. She walked a little closer to me and spoke in a low voice so only I could hear. "You're acting weird. What were you and Yuzu talking about?"

A shiver went down my spine.

"Uhhh, n-n-nothing," I replied softly, but I was a quivering mess.

"...Nothing, huh? I hope that's true." Even Hinami looked surprised by my stuttering, scratched record routine.

"R-right."

"More importantly, I haven't seen any signs that you're trying to complete your assignment."

"Oh, uh, right. I'll do it, don't worry."

“I see... Okay, then.”

She must have decided any more conversation would either be pointless or make the others wonder, because she walked back to Mizusawa’s side. A second later, she was chatting happily again. Both of them seemed to be having a good time.

Come on, Tomozaki, snap out of it! I wasn’t here to observe Hinami’s chameleon act. I had an assignment to complete. I was here for the EXP.

Forcing myself to concentrate, I thought back over our meeting the previous day to remind myself of my tasks.

* * *

“Your assignment for our outing is to make at least two successful suggestions.”

“...Meaning?”

Having received my assignment from Hinami, I asked for the details.

“What I said. Listen, when you’re out with a group, you’ve got to make decisions involving everyone, like where to go, what to eat, and when to go home.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

True, assuming everyone didn’t just go wherever they wanted to eat.

“Which means one person has to make a suggestion, and everyone else has to go along with it. Even if the other people wanted to go there to start with, someone has to say it, right?”

“Right.” True enough—someone had to break the ice.

“So a successful suggestion is when you propose an idea for where to go or what to eat and get the rest of us to accept it. And your job is to do that two or more times.”

So that’s what she meant. Got it.

“I see...but I have a question,” I said, raising my hand.

“Yes, Tomozaki-kun?”

She pointed at me like some sexy schoolteacher. Even though I was the one who started it, I was a little embarrassed. The teacher act really worked for her.

“Um, why am I getting this assignment?”

“Great question, Tomozaki-kun. There are two main reasons.”

Hinami raised two fingers next to her face. She was still talking in that grown-up way. It was hard not to listen when she sounded so sexy.

“T-two?”

“First, it’ll give you practice in taking the initiative in a group

setting.”

“Taking the initiative?” I didn’t quite get it.

“Bottom line, making a successful suggestion means you’re temporarily controlling the mood of the group.”

“Um...?” I thought that over.

Making a successful suggestion was controlling the mood?

“We talked about mood before, right? And I told you that mood provides the standard for judging good and bad in a given group, remember?”

“Oh yeah, you did say that.”

I’d experienced it myself during the Erika Konno incident.

Basically, mood was the standard for the value judgments of a group.

So her point was...? I tried my best to put together the two clues she’d given me.

I think I get it? Maybe?

“By getting everyone to think my suggestion is good...I’m controlling the mood?”

Hinami grinned. “Hexactly.”

“There it is.”

“In other words,” Hinami said, touching my chest with her fingertip. “Advancing your suggestions gives you practice in manipulating the mood of the group.”

Although my heart was pounding at the unexpected touch, I put on a mask of calm. “Um, it’s so I can learn to control the mood?”

“Right. That’s why you’re going to advance your suggestions,” Hinami said, removing her finger from my chest. “And do you know why you should learn to control mood?”

Trying to ignore the lingering sensation of her lifting her finger, I answered her question.

“...Because it’s part of being a normie?”

“Hexactly.”

“You’re really letting them fly today, huh?”

“Basically, normies are the ones who control the mood, right?” Hinami continued, ignoring my comment.

Whatever. I thought of a couple of people who tended to control the mood. She was right—they were all normies.

“True...they’re usually the ones running the show, like the leader or the boss. Seems to me they’re usually top-tier normies.”

“Right. People like Nakamura or Erika Konno or me.”

“Yep, you’re amazing.”

I’m used to her tooting her own horn. At this point, I’m just like, *Suit yourself.*

“That’s why this assignment is the best way of becoming a boss

normie.”

“Makes sense,” I said before suddenly coming to my senses. “... Uh, are you telling me to become a boss?”

Nope, no way, no can do. Obviously.

To my surprise, Hinami shook her head. “I wouldn’t tell you to suddenly become the boss of a normie group. I’m just saying you should gradually build up your skills so you can get there eventually.”

“Gradually...”

And we’re assuming that’s possible...?

“Yes. By getting people to accept your suggestions, you’ll get used to manipulating the mood. From there, you just gradually get better at doing it in more difficult situations.”

“Uh, really?” So... “That means there are more difficult moods to manipulate?”

“Obviously. It’s still too early for you to really see it, but you can have total control over the mood of a larger group, or you can maintain control for more than just one situation. There’s all sorts of things you can do.”

Big groups and longer periods? I tried to think of examples, but none came to mind.

“...For example?”

“Like the thing where uncool girls can’t wear the necktie at our school. No one goes around giving warnings, but a lot of people have accepted that rule for a long time.”

“Oh, that.”

Of course, as she explained, she herself was wearing a necktie. Anyway, I get the point. That totally is a thing—an invisible social rule that a large group takes for granted.

“By repeatedly manipulating the mood of a large group, you instill a certain norm. Once that happens, it solidifies so you don’t need to manipulate it anymore. If you fully develop your skills, you’ll be able to pull it off.” Hinami smiled theatrically.

“...I see.”

I thought it over, even though the implication behind her expression and explanation scared me. By controlling the mood over time, you changed the group’s basic norms until they were so taken for granted, you didn’t have to do anything anymore. Basically, it was brainwashing.

“And people don’t just manipulate the mood at schools. They do the same thing with companies, city governments, and even whole countries.”

“S-so...”

Making a small group do something one time, like while shopping with friends, was the easiest example of the phenomenon. Doing the

same thing to create a widespread norm was the difficult version. As the scale got larger, so did the extent and strength and staying power of the manipulation.

“So...if you take it to its logical extreme, you can make something like a cult.” Hinami grinned.

“A cult? What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

“It happens with religions, too, Tomozaki-kun.”

“Oh...”

That sounded dangerous.

“But that’s the general idea. It’s not just religion. No matter how big or small the group, you can find this mood manipulation everywhere. No group can exist without it. That’s true at school, in families, and even for the two of us right now. As a species, we’re unable to function without standards to judge our actions by.”

“I—I see.”

It made sense, even though I was getting overwhelmed. She was acting like she’d discovered the truth of all the mysteries of life.

“You understand now, right? If you practice manipulating the mood on the smallest scale, soon you’ll be able to do it on a slightly larger scale and then an even larger one. As you progress, you’ll be able to control the mood of the group more and more, which is to say, you’ll become the boss of the group—and a true normie.”

“So that’s the deal, huh?”

“If I told you right off the bat to take over the group, you wouldn’t know how, but if I tell you to advance your suggestions for where to go or what to eat, you have an idea of what to do, right?”

“That is true.”

“Once you get the hang of it, you start doing it more and more—changing norms in bigger groups—and then suddenly becoming a normie doesn’t seem so impossible. Got it?”

It sounded simple and difficult at the same time.

“Yeah. Hexactly.”

“That’s not how you use it.”

Hinami looked extremely displeased. Apparently, the intricacies of *hexactly* were perilous indeed.

“Um...what about the second reason?”

“We’ll come back to ‘hexactly’ later. The second reason has to do with responsibility.”

“Responsibility?” Yet another fancy word.

“It’s very simple. Look, you’re alone at school, right?”

“Ouch, geez.”

She’d just landed a surprise right hook.

“This is important. When you’re by yourself, you don’t need to

take responsibility for other people. Basically, you're the only one who experiences the consequences of your actions, right?"

"Huh? Well, I guess so." If you're alone, then yeah.

"If you go into a restaurant without looking it up first and the food's lousy, you're the only one who'll be upset. If you go into a random store to go shopping and they don't have what you want, you've only wasted your own time. You haven't dragged down anyone else with you."

"Very true."

That was the good thing about being a loner. One coin, two sides.

"But if you join a group as a normie and start making decisions, that isn't the case anymore."

"...Huh? In other words?"

"If you suggest that everyone eat at a certain place and it's not good, it'll be your fault. If you suggest that everyone shop at a certain store and they don't have good stuff, you take the fall."

"Oh..." True enough.

"Of course, everyone agreed to your suggestion, so logically everyone should share the blame, but all the same, the general feeling tends to be that the person who suggested it is the one who messed up, right?"

"I can see that."

"And you're a loner, right?"

"That again?"

"I want you to directly experience the responsibility that comes with decision-making because you haven't dealt with that. And I want you to get used to it. To take it a little further, I want you to be able to work comfortably with it. This assignment is the first step toward that goal."

"...I understand." I nodded, satisfied with her explanation.

"Basically, the goal is to drag the loneliest loner out of the warm bath of loneliness you've been soaking in all this time. Because it's actually a putrid swamp."

"Was that really necessary?"

Hinami can never stop at a simple explanation.

* * *

So now I had to convince everyone to accept at least two of my own suggestions. This was no time to be observing Hinami and Mizusawa and speculating.

We'd left Beams and were now walking around trying to decide where to head next. Ahead of me from left to right were Mizusawa, Hinami, and Izumi. Izumi was walking the tiniest bit behind Mizusawa

and Hinami, who were chatting happily as before. Izumi was alternately joining in their conversation and glancing back at me.

Huh? Wait a second... Is someone worrying about me?

Uh-oh, this was bad. Wandering off in thought was fine and dandy, but not if it made other people worry about me or spoiled their fun. Up till this point, keeping to myself hadn't caused any problems, but now I was feeling responsible... Hey, was this what Hinami meant about responsibility?! She was right! I never felt this way as a loner...!

I had to do something so Izumi would stop worrying about me. I picked up my pace until I was walking next to her.

"...This really is tough," I commented, with a carefully composed expression of natural calm.

"Sure is!" Izumi chirped. "Did you decide on something yet?"

Oh yeah, I was supposed to buy something, too. Assignments, presents...I was drowning in things to do.

"Not yet. You?"

"Me neither. I asked Hiro earlier, but... Oh, I mean Mizusawa!"

"Oh right."

She was worried I didn't get that Hiro was Mizusawa. I did. Still a nice gesture.

"He said Shuji's been worried about breaking out lately and I should give him acne cream. Man, he'd be so mad!"

"Ha-ha-ha." Mostly I was laughing about the fact that Nakamura cared about breaking out. "But the general idea could work, right? Getting him something he already wants, I mean."

"Yeah, but...I don't know what that would be. Do you...? No, you wouldn't."

"Hey, don't give up on me before you even ask!"

Hinami disses me so often, I'm getting better at comebacks. At least when I'm with friends.

"Ah-ha-ha! But you really don't know, do you?"

"Um..." As I thought about it, I glanced at Hinami and Mizusawa. They looked as happy as ever. "I know he likes *Atafami*... He's strong, he's handsome, he's got a normie hairdo..."

"Hey, wait a minute..." Izumi had latched onto something.

"Huh? What? Normie hair... Oh!"

A light bulb went on. *Speaking of hair...that could work.*

Izumi and I looked at each other and spoke at the same time.

"Hair wax!"

"Those clip things for your bangs!"

"...What?"

Izumi looked at me again. "No...nothing," I mumbled

incoherently.

“Tomozaki, what did you just say?”

I’m not sure why, but I knew she would think I was weird if I told the truth. *Um, please stop staring!* “Nothing...”

“You said those clip things for your bangs, didn’t you?”

Guess she heard me. She was trying not to laugh.

“No, I mean, I’ve got this picture in my head of popular guys pinning their bangs out of the way or something...”

“But Shuji’s hair is short!”

“Very true.”

The strength of her argument was obvious. Still, there was something about the way we’d spoken at the same time, something about the rhythm of it, that made me feel like I might be getting a little better at conversation. *Me*, of all people.

“...Ah-ha-ha! But seriously, wouldn’t wax be a good present?!”

“Y-yeah, I think so!”

I mean, if I had to choose between good and bad, I’d say good. If I had to choose between good and I don’t know, though, I’d go with I don’t know.

“Hey, Hiro! What about hair wax?”

“Ooh, good idea! He’s got a pretty good collection!”

“Oh...then he might already have the one I get.”

“Nah, I probably have an idea of which ones he doesn’t have yet.”

“Really?! Wow, Hiro!”

“I’m the one who taught him about it in the first place.”

“No way! Oh right, you want to be a beautician!”

“Yup. There’s a kind of pricey brand that I don’t think he has. He likes to buy a bunch of cheap ones and try them all out.”

“Really! You’d think with how important he acts, he’d be less of a cheapskate.”

“Not really, Yuzu. With wax, more expensive doesn’t always mean better quality. It’s more important to find the one that’s right for you. Just like girlfriends.”

“Shut up, playboy! Guys like you don’t know anything.”

“I’m not a playboy! You’d never guess it, of course.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, my hair, for one thing.”

“You think you have playboy hair?”

“I mean, when I go to the salon and they ask me what style I want, I tell them to give me the player style.”

“Ah-ha-ha! I don’t believe you!”

“It’s true!”

Yuzu and Mizusawa broke out laughing. Watching their exchange made me think about a few things. *Getting good at conversation? Who*

am I kidding? I just survived because Yuzu was so good herself. You're still a noob, Tomozaki.

* * *

From there, we went to the Tokyu Hands store on the west side of Omiya Station, which according to Mizusawa was the place to go for hair wax. Actually, I realized, this was the second time he'd pushed through a suggestion, the first being Beams. Both very naturally, too. Witness the power of the normie.

The four of us took the elevator up to the men's hair product section on the fourth floor. A whole lot of waxes in fancy boxes were lined up on the shelves.

"Wonder which one of these you should get," Hinami said to Izumi.

"No idea. Hiro?"

"I don't think he has any of these." Mizusawa pointed to a line of wax in tubes.

"What do those numbers mean? How stiff it is?"

"Yeah. Two is soft, and ten is stiff."

"Which one is the best?"

"Depends on your hair type and length. Like, here..." Mizusawa squeezed some number 8 wax out of a sample tube. "Tomozaki, help me out."

"Huh?"

Mizusawa gestured for me to come closer. I obeyed.

"Ooh, time for the Takahiro hair show!" Hinami smiled as she urged him on. *What? Hair show?*

"For example, Tomozaki's hair is on the longer side, but it's soft, so I'll use number eight, the second stiffest one. Of course, it's better to try them all. Your best bet is to get them to do some tests at the salon and use whatever they recommend. The person who cut Tomozaki's hair is hell a good, too."

"Uh, um...?"

"Just listen. For this amount of hair, you need a dollop the size of your pinkie fingernail. Put it on your palm and rub it around like this. And by the way, you really should start with wet hair and use a blow-dryer. How you dry it determines much of the result. What I'm doing now is an emergency intervention."

"Wow, really?!" Hinami was acting impressed, but I knew it was fake. She knew all of this already, I was sure.

"You take this and apply it evenly to all the hair except the bangs. I've heard some people think they only need to put it on the part they want to set, like the top or the sides, but that's wrong. You put it all

over. You just gotta be careful not to put too much on your bangs, 'cause they'll look greasy."

"Oh..."

I stood in shock, listening passively to Mizusawa's spiel.

"With hair this length, I think a bit of wave would look good. So I'm gonna apply the wax all over and then scrunch like this to separate it into sections."

I heard a few well-timed scrunches from my hair.

"Ooh!" Izumi seemed to be enjoying herself. What the hell was going on?

"Uh, what do I look like right now?"

"Just wait. This is the second crucial point. People tend to forget this when they're doing their own hair, or they might not have ever learned it, but it's really important to pay attention to the back of your head. 'Course, you can't see it in a mirror."

"Really?" Hinami exclaimed, nodding attentively. I took it as a signal that she wanted me to pay attention to this information.

"The back of your head affects how you look from the side and the back. As they say, the side profile is especially important for guys, so you want to make sure you look good from that angle when you're doing your hair. To be more specific..." Mizusawa drew a semicircle in the air with his palm. "You want to puff out the back a little!"

"Puff out?"

Even I was getting more and more fascinated by Mizusawa's lecture. Yeah, he was a good talker.

"You'll see it if you look at the profile of a foreigner or a manga character, but heads look more attractive when the back is rounded. You can even just Google it. Problem is, a lot of Japanese people have flat heads in back, so you've got to create the shape with hairstyling."

"Oh..."

"Hiro, you sound like a door-to-door salesman!" Izumi interrupted teasingly.

"Shut up! Anyway, you lift this part up... I'd really like to use hairspray at this point to set it, but since we're inside, it should be fine for a little bit. Okay, done."

"Oh wow! Tomozaki, that style looks surprisingly good on you!" Izumi's eyes were sparkling.

"I didn't need the 'surprisingly.'" I've got comebacks to insults, if nothing else. Just throw me under the bus, and you'll never have to worry about an awkward silence afterward.

Hinami looked at me with a bright smile. "That's so cool! Looks like you have a special skill, too, Takahiro!"

"And you've got a big mouth, Aoi."

Yeah, they're definitely close.

Anyway, the aspiring beautician had just done my hair.

“Uh, what does my head look like right now?”

“You can take a look later in the bathroom, dude.” Mizusawa had a big grin on his face.

“It really does look good! You should do it like that for school!” Izumi gazed intently at my hair. She seemed to mean it.

“Oh yeah, maybe.” The surprise compliment embarrassed me. I don’t know how to respond when people aren’t ragging on me. “Um, uh, weren’t you getting a present...?”

I changed the subject to something less embarrassing as quickly as possible. Izumi’s present!

“Oh right! So which one would be good for Shuji?”

“Hmm... Well, his hair is short, so probably this one.” Mizusawa picked up a tube of number 10 and handed it to Izumi.

“Okay, I’ll get this! I’m going to pay. Wait for me, okay?”

She rushed over to the register. I could tell she was trying to avoid making the rest of us wait for her even a second more than necessary. If it had been Erika Konno, I bet she’d walk to the register as regally and slowly as a queen.

“Dude, your hair was so easy to do. Did you just get it cut?”

“Uh, about two weeks ago, I guess?”

“No way! Where’d you get it done?”

“I think the place was called—”

Hinami’s shoe tapped my shoe ever so lightly. A second after I said the name of the salon, I realized she had been telling me not to say it.

“Yeah! I told him about that place!” Hinami broke in, immediately after I answered and before Mizusawa could react. She did it so naturally, too.

“Okay, makes sense. I was just thinking it was the same place you go. So you told him about it?”

“Yeah! He said he was looking for a good place, so I gave him their name. You get points for recommending people, too!”

“Ooh, devious!”

They laughed together. I laughed, too, a few seconds too late.

Uh, okay. I just screwed up, didn’t I?

It’s weird that Aoi and I go to the same salon, and I’d have a hard time passing it off as a coincidence. So I couldn’t just say the name of the salon without mentioning Hinami had told me about it. That’s why she’d said it herself the instant I said the name, to avoid suspicion.

Once Mizusawa had already said “Hey, isn’t that the place you go, Aoi?” it would have been too late; I should have been the one to mention the connection in the first place. Plus, Mizusawa is sharp. As I rebuked myself for the slip, I was again reminded how impressive

Hinami's skills really were. That was a split-second decision.

"Got it!" Izumi returned, beaming.

"Should we get going?" Probably to avoid further questioning, Hinami took the lead in getting us moving. There was an escalator nearby, so we took that down.

That's when it happened.

I got on the escalator, not noticing the mirror on the wall alongside it. I glanced nonchalantly in that direction and saw myself from head to foot.

I'm fairly hard on myself; that's how I got so good at *Atafami*. I'm very careful not to be proud of myself when I don't deserve it, especially when it comes to my looks, and I always try to judge myself based on objective standards. So I don't think this was a misjudgment.

That guy in the mirror wasn't a normie.

But he was walking alongside two cool-looking girls and one cool guy; he had good posture thanks to tensing his butt muscles; his chest was pushed out; his mouth was turned up; he was wearing stylish clothes he'd bought off a mannequin; he had well-shaped eyebrows; and the hair on his head had been styled by a classmate who was an aspiring beautician.

He didn't look like a pathetic geek. At least not to me.

* * *

The four of us took the escalator all the way to the first floor. They were all saying things like "You really found something good" and "Where to next?" and "What're you gonna buy, Tomozaki?"

I couldn't do any better than vague answers like "Oh, uh-huh." I was off in space.

My excitement from a minute earlier hadn't quite faded yet.

Hinami must have noticed something was off. "It's a tough choice, huh?" she said playfully. "Wanna stop by Starbucks or somewhere and rest for a couple minutes? I'm exhausted!"

"Ooh, good idea! I want a matcha Frappuccino!" Izumi responded, but I barely heard her.

I didn't look like a geek.

For a second, I hadn't even recognized myself. I was thinking, *Oh, there goes another normal-looking high school kid; go to hell, normies*, when I realized it was me. I know; it's kinda silly to me, too. After all, I'm doing exactly what Hinami taught me with regard to my posture and expression, so of course it works, and as for my eyebrows and hair, they were done by a pro and a pro-hopeful, so naturally, the

results are good. And the clothes, well, I just borrowed them from a well-dressed mannequin in a stylish store.

Put all that together, and it doesn't matter what state the original was in—the end result won't be horrible. I understood that.

But I was still happy.

My sister asked me if I'd been reading books on how to not be a geek, and Mizusawa said the way I talked was more upbeat now. I'd been getting comments already, and every one of them made me happy. But this was different.

The change was totally obvious to me. I felt like I'd accomplished something. Even I was surprised by how much that little realization reverberated in my heart.

“Tomozaki-kun, what's wrong?”

“Hinami...”

Hinami had dropped back to my side to talk to me. Given the circumstances, I couldn't tell her what I was thinking, so I just shook my head. That clearly wasn't enough for her, but she quickly hid it behind another expression.

“Come on!” she said with her usual deliberate cheeriness.

“Sorry, I'm coming.”

I imitated her and answered as brightly as I could manage. I started walking until I was right beside her again.

“I'm going to keep at it.”

“Huh?”

I'd whispered so quietly, only she could hear me. She seemed a little confused, but I didn't mind.

* * *

“Uh, I'll have a Caramel Macchiato, in a—a Tall?”

“One Tall Caramel Macchiato?”

“Uh, yeah!”

Everyone knows it's easy to screw up a Starbucks order, but the truly terrifying thing is that even if you try to take charge of the situation, the subtleties of your response when you have to make a split-second decision reveal your Starbucks virginity. In my case, even though I'd never ordered a Tall before, I said it like I knew all about it, so when the barista detected my inexperience, they also saw I was trying to pretend I knew the lingo. Okay, what am I talking about? I'm worrying about this too much.

But honestly, I felt so out of place in there, even the little things started to bother me. The other customers weren't as elitist as I'd expected, but that wasn't the problem. It was the part-time workers with their “Look at me! Everything is awesome!” attitude. The sunny

mood was so extreme, I felt like they were explicitly rejecting me for being gloomy. If it weren't for the sense of accomplishment I'd experienced a few minutes earlier, I think I would have run out the door.

I moved over to the drink pickup counter, got my macchiato, and headed to the table Mizusawa had saved for us. Izumi and Hinami were behind me. Both of them were scrutinizing the menu with great seriousness. That was typical for Hinami, but didn't Izumi already say she wanted the matcha something-or-other?

"Good work."

"Oh, right."

Mizusawa was already sitting down. There was a sofa with two chairs facing it—just enough room for four people. Mizusawa was sitting in one of the chairs sipping something brown with cream on top.

I faced a difficult decision.

Where should I sit?

I didn't have much time to decide. If I stood here hesitating, Mizusawa would inevitably ask me what was wrong, and Hinami would yell at me for that. I kept walking toward him, giving myself a window of only a few seconds between seeing the table and reaching my seat. My only option was to choose a seat based on raw instinct.

I went for the sofa seat kitty-corner from Mizusawa in order to put a little distance between myself and his normie aura. Diagonal lines are the longest.

"Whew, I'm beat."

I wasn't especially tired, but I wanted to try saying it anyway. In my mind, normies say stuff like that all the time, so I would start by copying that.

"Ha-ha-ha. We haven't even walked that much yet."

"Yeah, guess not."

Well, that was a quick parry on his part. Patting myself on the back for failing at a conversation about being tired, I began to review my situation. Calmly.

Given our arrangement, wasn't Izumi likely to sit next to me?

Even if we sat beside each other every day at school, sitting next to each other on a sofa meant something different. There was the issue of how close she'd be, and on top of that, she was wearing...what she was wearing today. Especially with the chest part. I'd be in serious trouble if I got...you know.

"Did you decide what you're getting Nakamura?"

"Uh, yeah...kind of."

"Really?"

Actually, I'd decided a couple minutes earlier. But right then, I

was more worried about who would get to the table next. I glanced at the register. Someone was walking toward us. It was Hinami. *Hey, over here! I'm not ready for Izumi to sit next to me yet!*

"So what are you getting?"

"Uh, well..."

Just as I was about to answer, Hinami arrived at the table and plopped right down next to Mizusawa. Yeah, that's what I expected. She wanted to put me through a test. That decided it: Izumi was sitting next to me. I was nervous.

"Ooh, Takahiro, that looks good!" Hinami was looking at Mizusawa's drink.

"Don't think I'm giving you any."

"I didn't ask you for any!"

Still as chummy as ever. She touched his shoulder, too. *Maybe she sat over there because she's so close with him? Or maybe not? Doesn't matter anyway.*

"Actually, yours looks amazing. What'd you get?"

Mizusawa peered at her drink with interest. The cup she placed on the table was topped with whipped cream flecked with black powder and drizzled with chocolate syrup, and underneath that was a slushy white liquid with cookies mixed in.

She raised it smugly to face level. "A tiramisu Frappuccino."

"Tiramisu? They have those?"

"There's that baked cheesecake frap on the summer menu, right? I asked for a shot of espresso and some chocolate sauce, and then I put some cocoa powder on myself. My own secret menu item!"

"No way. Looks so good..."

"Right?"

"But what about the calories?"

"C'mon, you can't count calories at Starbucks! ...Awww. Guess I better go running later."

"Ha-ha-ha! Props to you for running at all."

Who was this girl? I almost burst out laughing as I glanced at Hinami. Her and her cheese... Better not smile too much, though, or else she'll kick me again.

"And don't think I didn't notice you getting cheese again."

"Shut up, Takahiro! It's none of your business!"

"What?" Before I could stop myself, I'd reacted.

"Huh? What, Tomozaki?"

"Oh...nothing."

Brushing over Mizusawa's question, I focused on the sweetness of my Caramel Macchiato to center myself again. Damn, it was good. It slid down easy once my tongue was numbed by the sugar overload. *Wait, that's not the point here. Uh...oh right. What Mizusawa just said.*

That caught me off guard.

I thought I was the only one who knew about Hinami's weakness for cheese. Guess not.

There's no reason she'd hide it from other people, so anyone she'd gone out to eat with multiple times would know about it. Including Mizusawa.

Actually, Mizusawa had probably been out to eat with her a lot more than I had, which meant he probably knew about her cheese addiction better than I did. After all, they hung out so much, people thought they were dating. I'd clearly misinterpreted my position.

Whatever. I'd reacted, but I was just a little surprised. That's all. That's *all*.

"Oh, I almost got the Caramel Macchiato, too!"

With that, Izumi sat down next to me without a moment's hesitation. Don't normies worry about where they sit? Or are they just good at hiding it? Or do I just not notice the signs of their concern?

Oh right!

"So you got the matcha one in the end?" I asked.

"What can I say?"

She smiled smugly at me, and I couldn't figure out why. Did she think I was giving her a compliment?

"Did you decide what to buy?" she asked, setting her drink on the table and leaning forward to sip it. Every time she did, I could obviously see down her shirt. I tried not to pay attention, but her clothes were even tighter than her school uniform, which made her boobs look even bigger. I found something else to look at as I answered.

"Uh...pretty much."

"Really?! Tell me, tell me!"

"Oh yeah, what did you decide on?"

"I'm so curious!"

My head was spinning from the barrage of questions from three normies, so I bucked the pressure by earnestly explaining my thought process. Hey, if I'm explaining something I've already thought through, I can even do it around normies!

After I was finished...

"That's, uh..." Mizusawa was struggling to find a response.

"I don't know what to say," Izumi said, shifting her eyes away.

"...Only you, Tomozaki-kun!" Hinami said, kindly tying everyone's comments together with her own indirect remark. *Very impressive display of skill. Thank you very much for not hurting me.*

Still, it's just about the only thing I can give him. Hinami hadn't sent me any signals slapping down my idea, so all was well, right?

Well, this is my version of fair play.

We finished up our break and headed to the electronics store, and I bought my present.

When the four of us left the store, Izumi and I had both bought our presents, so the day's goal had been accomplished.

Speaking of goals, I had naturally advanced my suggestion of going to the electronics store, leaving me with one more hurdle to meet my minimum target. The whole thing hadn't made much of a wave. Was this easier than I thought? Could I just keep going along these lines?

Okay, I got this. I'll just think of what to do next and suggest it to everyone.

Problem was...I couldn't think of any good ideas.

Oh. Before, I was able to suggest something because I had the goal of buying a present in mind, but when no such goal existed, it was hard to say what I wanted to do.

For example, I go to the arcade a lot, but I wasn't sure if that was a good place for these three. Okay, how about getting some food? We just went to Starbucks, so some people might not be hungry. Who was I to suggest eating out anyway?

I was having trouble even finding something to suggest, let alone making everyone go along with it.

"Okay, what next? Is everyone hungry?" It was Mizusawa. So that's how you do it. If you don't know if everyone is hungry, you ask. So obvious.

"Not really," Hinami said.

"I'm getting there!" Izumi said.

"I'm fairly hungry," I added.

"Okay..." Mizusawa hesitated for a few seconds. "I know a pizza place with killer cheese. Wanna go?"

"For sure," Hinami said right away, even though she was the only one who said she wasn't hungry.

"What about you guys?"

"Pizza sounds great!"

"Fine by me."

"Okay, it's decided!"

As I watched Mizusawa succeed with yet another of his suggestions, I wondered what the hell the difference between him and me was.

* * *

After we finished eating pizza, we genuinely had nothing left to do, so

the mood drifted toward splitting up. Incidentally, when Hinami was eating the pizza, she didn't have that incredibly adorable smile on her face, which makes me think she didn't like it all that much. Guess not all cheeses are created equal. To me, it was your basic pizza.

We made our way back to Omiya Station and went through the ticket gates. Izumi was taking the Takasaki Line, while the rest of us were taking the Saikyo Line.

"That was fun! See you later!"

Izumi waved good-bye to the three of us. We waved back. Since it was Izumi, I imagined she included me in the "fun" part, too. I swallowed back tears, wanting to soothe her and reassure her that she didn't have to make such an effort. Oh geez.

Mizusawa, Hinami, and I headed for the Saikyo Line and chatted about random stuff while we waited for the train. The conversation was around 40 percent Mizusawa, 40 percent Hinami, 10 percent me, and 10 percent the station announcer. Not bad numbers.

After a couple minutes, the train came. We got on, and after a couple more minutes, we got to my stop, Kitayono.

"Well, see you later."

"Later, dude."

"Bye, Tomozaki-kun."

They watched me get off, and the door shut behind me. I glanced back casually. Through the window, I could see Hinami's happy smile as she talked to Mizusawa, pulling away from me with ever greater speed.

...Come on. What is that about?!

But anyway, the shopping trip was finally over.

Ultimately, I had only made one successful suggestion—going to the electronics store—meaning I hadn't reached my assigned goal. I knew I should be thinking about why I'd failed, but something else was bothering me just the tiniest bit.

I agonized over it for a while and eventually decided there was nothing unusual in asking a question, so I arrived at a course of action I probably wouldn't have taken before. I opened LINE.

Fumiya Tomozaki: Who'd you hear the rumor about Hinami and Mizusawa from?

Yuzu-san: Thought you might be wondering!

After a bunch more texts, she finally told me she'd heard it from someone in Erika Konno's group. She didn't know if it was true. Pfft. Well, whatever.

Nakamura's birthday was on Wednesday, July 27. I was already getting nervous.

* * *

"I'm sure you've been considering why you were unable to complete your assignment, yes?"

It was Monday morning, two days after I'd bought Nakamura's present. We were in Sewing Room #2. The morning meeting began with Hinami's question, and her voice was a little scarier than usual.

"Um, it was easier than I expected to get us to go to the electronics store, so I guess I got overly confident..."

"And before that?"

"Huh?"

"Before we went to the electronics store. That was the middle of the day, right? As far as I could tell, you didn't even try to suggest anything before that."

"Uh, um..." I shifted my gaze away from her. "Mizusawa just kept coming up with stuff..."

"And you didn't foresee that?"

"Foresee what?"

"That if Mizusawa was there, that would happen. You didn't even consider it?"

"Uh, no, it's just that..."

She's right; I could have predicted that...but I'm so new to all of this! I got overwhelmed!

"I see. Well, anyway. You of all people should know you won't gain any of the EXP right there in front of you if you hang back and don't participate in the battle."

"I-I'm sorry."

"...Honestly, I do sometimes give you assignments that I expect you to fail at purely so you can learn from that failure, but I didn't expect you to have trouble clearing this one... I was going by your current ability and attitude, but I may need to revise my assessment."

The flicker of disappointment in her words hit hard.

"I understand. I'll give it my all from now on."

Actually, I'd been making an effort to go out and grind for EXP recently, and I sensed that Hinami had given me some credit for that. Now I'd gone and betrayed her expectations.

I knew I hadn't taken proactive measures this time. Why not? Part of it was the nervousness of being around three normies, but what was I thinking about while we were shopping? *Oh right. What Izumi said about Hinami and Mizusawa...*

"Hey, Hinami..."

“What? You aren’t going to make me lose even more faith in you, are you?”

Hinami’s sharp gaze was discouraging.

“...Never mind.” *Yeah, it was dumb to worry about that. Not worth asking about. Forget it.*

“What?”

“Nothing...” It wasn’t important.

“...Okay. Anyway, did you notice or learn or wonder about anything while we were shopping? That’s what matters.”

I refocused my attention and thought back to the shopping trip. The first thing that came to mind was my reflection in the mirror.

“I think what struck me most was that my appearance...is improving a little,” I offered somewhat hesitantly.

“Huh,” Hinami said, smiling kindly. “That’s progress.”

“But...it’s just my own impression.”

“That’s important, too. Visible changes improve your motivation and assertiveness. It’s exciting when you finally start doing three-digit damage, right? Those obvious turning points are important for inspiring you to continue.”

As usual, she only looked happy when she was talking about games.

“Ha-ha, yeah. Same when you master a new skill.”

“Yeah! ‘Specially a big AOE spell!” Hinami was getting as excited as a little kid, then she coughed. “Of course, as long as I’m watching, I won’t let you slack off whether you’re motivated or not.”

And the coach from hell was back.

“I’m not gonna slack off! I want to do this!”

“Really? Well, in the end, your own motivation is what matters most. When it comes to changing yourself, your actions are less important than how you feel about the little things that happen around you—your frame of mind.”

“Huh. You really think so?”

“I do. Especially at first. Like how in the tutorial you sometimes start out with crazy equipment that gives you EXP just for walking around or something. Right now, you’re in the tutorial. Where you are, getting minor EXP in everyday situations is effective.”

“H-huh.”

There was the happy face again. She really is a gaming freak.

“So you didn’t have any observations related to the assignment? Any thoughts?”

“Let me think...,” I said, pausing for a minute before continuing. “Since I wasn’t able to make any solid suggestions, I thought a lot about the difference between Mizusawa and me. I noticed that most of his suggestions had substance.”

“Substance?”

“Like, he suggested we go to Beams, and when we went in there, it really was a stylish store with lots of fancy stuff. And when he suggested the pizza place, he was considering how much you like cheese...”

Hinami looked at me blankly. “Hey, Tomozaki-kun. Are you feeling sick today?”

“Huh?”

“You’re being less objective than usual. Think a little harder.”

“About what?”

“I’d say it’s the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

As I tried to figure out what she meant, she put her finger to her lips and frowned.

“Or maybe shopping was just too much for you...”

“What are you saying?”

“Let’s take Mizusawa’s first suggestion, Beams. How was that place, really?”

“Um, I think it was a nice store... Of course, it was too expensive and fancy for me, ha-ha—”

Hinami suddenly reached out and pinched my lips shut, cutting off my pathetic laugh.

“Mmph?!”

Don’t touch my mouth like that! It was my first time! Be gentle!

“That’s not what I meant. How was it as a place to buy a present for Nakamura?”

Hinami’s face was still blank. She released my lips, but they still felt weird.

“...Uh, um, well, now that you mention it...we didn’t buy anything there, but it wasn’t that bad, right?”

Hinami sighed at my noncommittal answer. “Listen. The stuff they have there, especially the accessories you could give someone as a present? It’s all great, but none of it fits Nakamura.”

“R-really?” I hadn’t realized that.

“...Well, it would have been hard for you to see that. After all, when it comes to clothes, you only know how to buy the whole mannequin. You’ll understand in time. But what about the pizza?”

“What do you mean?”

“What did you think of that place?” The question was a test. “You didn’t have any opinions after eating there?”

“Oh,” I said, realizing what she was getting at. “It...wasn’t very good.”

“Right? So you did notice. Meaning Mizusawa’s suggestions *didn’t* have substance.”

“And...? Are you saying that it’s easier to push through bad suggestions?”

“Close, but not quite.”

“Close?”

Hinami nodded. “Precisely speaking, how good a suggestion is has nothing to do with how easy it is to convince others to go along with it.”

I thought about that for a couple seconds, then decided it made sense. “Huh.”

“Do you get it now?”

“You’re saying what’s important is to be convincing?”

Even if the pizza wasn’t actually good, as long as you convinced people it was, the suggestion would be accepted.

“Right. More precisely, convincing people is *everything*. In the case of the pizza, its actual quality has no impact on the ease of advancing the suggestion. The only thing that matters is making the other people think it might be good.”

It seemed obvious, but man, she was being brutally honest.

“So to take that to the extreme,” I replied, “if you trick people with a suggestion that sounds good, it’ll be accepted, even if it’s not?”

“Exactly. The truth is, Mizusawa suggested a pizza place that wasn’t very good and a store with nothing Nakamura would like, but both suggestions went through very smoothly, right?”

Hinami sounded like she was explaining something totally obvious, ignoring the irony.

“Huh. The world is kinda messed up,” I said before realizing the essence of what she was saying. “...Wait a minute. Doesn’t that sound like bad game balance?”

What kind of rule was that? With shitty rules like that, how is life a good game?!

“Why?”

“Because you can’t get people to accept what’s best! That’s weird! It’s not elegant. It’s trash!”

Hinami sighed. “What are you talking about? I’m just explaining a simple rule: The persuasiveness of suggestions takes precedence over their quality. Don’t you get it?”

“Now you’re just twisting logic...”

“Okay, what if there was a negotiation game where you had to convince the audience in order to reach your goal? Would that be a bad game? You’d have to speak in a convincing way and survey the other characters’ tastes and adjust for their interests. Try to imagine a game with that kind of realism.”

I tried to imagine it. I guess it would be divided into a negotiation part and a survey part, and you’d have to be good at both. You’d build

your negotiation skills and collect data and stuff. Yeah.

“...Sounds pretty good to me.”

“So then reality’s a fun game, too.”

“...Mm-hmm.” Once again, she’d won me over.

“What I said just now was very simple, but convincing everyone isn’t simple at all. There’s all kinds of rules. For example, you have to get everyone invested in the same thing. Also, it’s extra important to persuade the more vocal people.”

Hmm, make sure everyone wants it and persuade the more vocal people present. “...So after getting everyone on board, you convince the boss.”

“Right. Sometimes interests are more about responsibility than profit, and sometimes the vocal people aren’t bosses, but regardless, you still persuade the majority and then convince the people with high standing... For instance, do you remember Mizusawa’s suggestion?”

I thought back to that scene. Like she said, he’d won over the majority and then convinced the most vocal person.

“...Yeah. Pizza!”

“Hexactly.”

“And there it is.”

“He won over the hungry majority by suggesting a meal, and then he persuaded me—the most vocal person—with the phrase ‘killer cheese.’”

Once again, she’s tooting her own... Oh, never mind. We’ve been through this. Same with “hexactly.”

“I see... So that’s how you advance a suggestion.”

“Of course, if all your suggestions end up getting criticized afterward, people stop trusting you, so you can’t just throw out whatever.”

“This is getting complicated again.” It’s hard to balance everything.

“Anyway, that’s not the point of this conversation. We haven’t gotten to the bottom line.”

“The bottom line?”

Wasn’t it the thing about convincing the majority and persuading the most vocal people?

“You got all angry about how weird it is for people not to accept a suggestion that’s best, but that’s pointless. If you sit there with your arms crossed convinced that you’re right and don’t change your approach one bit, you still can’t convince anyone, so that’s totally useless.”

“Uh...?”

“If you don’t adjust, you’ll never in your whole life get anyone to

accept your ideas no matter how right they are, and you'll die without accomplishing anything. If you're not getting what you want, you need to change."

Her voice was sharp, like she was coldly ripping something to pieces. She was coming on so strong she almost had me, but I thought again. After all...

"Really? You're saying that just because my suggestions aren't being accepted, I should stop saying what I think is right and prioritize what's most convincing? Something about that seems wrong."

Now we were putting the cart before the horse. Once you stop saying what you believe is right, what's the point? That should be more important. Convincing people isn't the goal.

Hinami shook her head. "That's not what I'm trying to say."

"Then what are you saying?"

"If you're confident your suggestion is right, and you've learned about a 'bad rule' that says suggestions won't be accepted just because they're right..."

"...Yes?"

"If you want to make an impact, you have to make use of the bad rule."

"...Oh." I saw what she was getting at.

"If you think you're right, you just dress it up in a convincing coat of paint. Like camouflage. By doing that, you advance the same basic idea you always thought was right. Isn't that a healthy way to compete?"

I'd never thought of that strategy before—camouflage yourself to get what you want.

"Are you convinced?"

"...Yeah."

You don't insist you're right and fight according to your own rules. You climb into the ring governed by the rules of others, and you win. It sounded messed up, and it was scarily honest, but as far as I could tell, it was how NO NAME played.

That was somewhat different from my approach.

"It does seem like that would be effective in a group. Maybe even unavoidable."

The battle tactics I'd learned through playing games were different. Guess they didn't work too well in real life. That must be why I'd been floundering all this time as an outcast, while Hinami shot to the top of the normie world. I wanted to think more about that—but still, she'd convinced me.

"Sounds like you get it. Based on that, to persuade people and succeed in your suggestions, you've got to think about the stakes

everyone else has in the decision and convincing those whose opinions carry extra weight, rather than whether your idea is really right. Mizusawa is good at that. For instance, he convinced me by using the fact that I'm enticed by the word *cheese*. If you understand that, you've passed this assignment. Think about what Mizusawa did and learn from him."

"Okay, got it..."

But why did I feel so...I don't know, odd when Hinami told me to learn from Mizusawa? No, what am I saying? I'd been weird since the day before. Sober up. *So Hinami could always be persuaded with cheese? Interesting.*

3

Once you start speedrunning the minigames, you seriously can't stop

"Anyway, guys, I mentioned this before, but applications for student council candidates are due today. So get those in if you wanna run. The election is...um, this Friday, looks like. You can give the forms to me, put them in the box outside the teacher's lounge, or give them to the class election officer... And that's about it. Okay, everyone, stand up."

In her usual listless tone, Ms. Kawamura wrapped up her explanation. Well, well. The deadline she'd mentioned last week—for the application Hinami had picked up—was already here.

Homeroom ended, and the short break before first period began. Hinami brought a piece of paper up to Ms. Kawamura. *Huh, guess she's running.* The question was, who was she planning to have as her campaign manager? She sure hadn't mentioned anything to me, and I'd had too much on my mind to ask her. I had a feeling it might be me, but at the same time, I had a bad feeling about this whole thing.

When the other kids saw her hand in the paper, they sent a volley of encouraging shouts her way.

"Leave it to Aoi!"

"You've got my vote!"

"Ease up the school rules!"

"You'll win for sure!"

She was the most popular person in school. The kids in other classes would have already guessed she would run, and it seemed unlikely anyone would dare to go up against her. Plus, they probably wanted to leave everything in her capable hands. In one sense, her victory was all but assured.

And just as I was thinking that, something surprising happened.

"Here's mine!"

The lighthearted, casual voice belonged to—Mimimi.

I couldn't see what was written on the paper she handed to the teacher, but it was the same size as the one Hinami had turned in.

"Oh, so you're running, too, Mimimi? That's the kind of enthusiasm I like to see from our class!"

Mimimi had just turned in her application to run for student council president. At Ms. Kawamura's comment, all eyes turned to Mimimi.

"Wow, Mimimi's running, too!"

"I'm for her!"

"She's got my vote!"

"So brave!"

Needless to say, the response was positive, since Mimimi was popular, too, and she got plenty of warm comments herself. Of course, the one about being brave no doubt referred to the fact that she'd be running against Hinami.

As everyone focused on Mimimi, I instinctively turned toward Hinami. Her expression hadn't changed much, but I could detect pure surprise.

"So it's Aoi versus Mimimi!"

"This'll be a good fight!"

"Wonder who'll win!"

The class was abuzz with speculation. I wasn't sure if those last two were genuine or just meant to encourage Mimimi, but I had a hard time imagining Hinami losing. On the other hand, Mimimi was just as good as Hinami when it came to communication. Her grades were high, too, and she was good at sports. Maybe, just maybe, if Mimimi devoted herself to the election while Hinami was busy with other things...

"Damn! I can't believe Mimimi's running! This sucks!" Hinami complained—a little rude and overly honest.

"If we're fighting over grades, I'm gonna win!"

The class laughed even more at Mimimi's outspoken comeback and went on talking happily about the election.

* * *

During the break before fourth period, I went to the library, as I always did.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Her whispered greeting made me think of the rustling of an enormous, magical tree that covered the whole world with its branches. After I said hello back, the reading party began. As we sat side by side reading our respective books, just like we had the previous week, Kikuchi-san suddenly started talking to me.

"It looks like trouble is brewing... Don't you think?"

"Huh? Trouble?"

"You know, the student council election..."

Darkness had fallen on the forest of Kikuchi-san's eyes as she turned toward me while she spoke. What was the matter?

"Nanami-san is running, right? I just can't understand why..."

This was a surprising topic.

"I mean, she was joking about it. Like that thing about grades..."

"Yes, but...I don't think that's it."

Kikuchi-san slowly shook her head. Her downcast eyes looked like crescent moons, making me think of a mysterious night sky.

"You're probably right. Maybe she wants to change the school or change herself or something like that."

"I wonder..."

Kikuchi-san raised a long, pale finger—I could totally see a little bird coming to perch on it if she just held it out awhile—and softly stroked her cheek. She seemed lost in thought. She'd been slipping into more casual conversation with me, and those moments of openness helped me relax.

"Then again, I'd like to change myself as well...so I can see where she's coming from."

"Really? What do you want to change?" I asked casually.

"...Um, it's a s-secret!"

"Ah."

I glanced over at her. Behind the soft, beautiful, mysterious veil of her hair, I could glimpse her pink cheeks, as lovely as the forbidden fruit eaten by Adam and Eve. I gulped. *Um, what would Kikuchi-san want to change?*

"...A-are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine. It's...nothing."

I could hear something faintly sensual coming from her direction as her shoulders, as delicate as finely wrought glasswork, heaved up and down. When she looked up after a few moments, her moist eyes were quivering like the surface of a miraculous spring that shimmers with all the colors of the rainbow, but only once a year. If I moved even an inch closer, I was sure I would tumble right into them.

"Um, okay."

"...Okay."

Whatever this was between us, just me and Kikuchi-san and Kikuchi-san's mystified expression, was unusual. Time flowed so slowly, I could have watched each grain of sand falling through an hourglass, if I had one.

"Well, anyway...!"

Kikuchi-san was the first to free herself from the string of time tied to our waists. She picked up her book in a hurry and trotted out of the library.

"Huh."

Now that I was alone in the suddenly ordinary corner of the library, I figured I might as well keep reading my book. But what could her secret be? What did she want to change? What was with this girl and her enchanting ways?!

* * *

It was lunch break.

“Hey, can I talk to you?”

“Huh...? Hinami?”

“Come over here.”

She didn’t meet my eyes the whole way to the old school building. I figured we were headed for Sewing Room #2. It was unusual for Hinami to talk to me without playing up her persona, aside from at our meetings before and after school.

Taking care not to be noticed, I followed her at a distance. Yup, we were headed to Sewing Room #2.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have an emergency mission.”

Hinami perched lightly on one of the desks. To make matters worse, her short skirt rode up a little, drawing my eyes to her pretty, toned legs.

“What?”

“But first, the practical stuff. During the campaign period for student council, I’ll need to cut back on our meetings.”

“Oh, okay. Bet you’re gonna be busy.”

The thing was, she’d known about the election for a long time, and it wasn’t like her to make such a big deal about telling me. Must be because she didn’t expect Mimimi to run.

“On the same topic, do you know what being campaign manager involves?”

H-here we go. “Um, I have a general idea. You give a speech and stuff, right?”

“Yeah, pretty much. It’s a general support role.”

If she’s bringing this topic up right now, that must mean... The ominous feeling returned.

“But you already wrote the person you want for the job on that paper you turned in, right?”

“Yes, but the deadline for changing that person is tomorrow morning, actually.”

“R-really...? So I was right.”

She wanted me, the bottom-tier character, to play that critical role. Her Spartan methods had reached their peak.

“I’m not done yet. I was planning to get you to do it...but I

changed my mind.”

“Huh? You did?”

“I figured I’d be the only one running, so there wasn’t any pressure, and it’d be a perfect training opportunity for you. After all, you’ve been practicing hard to improve your tone, and speaking your mind is your strength, right? So I decided you could handle it.”

“Well, I could probably scrape by when it comes to that, at least.”

She’d told me before that speaking my mind was my weapon. Plus, I felt like all my practice with tone was starting to pay off.

“I figured I’d write your name down without asking and then tell you afterward, but...”

“Why the surprise tactic?” Not much of a riddle—the answer is pure, terrifying sadism.

“But now that Mimimi is running, things have changed.”

“...Oh, that’s what you’re getting at.”

If she was the only candidate, it didn’t matter if someone backed her up or not, so she’d planned to make the executive decision of giving me the job for training purposes. But now Mimimi was running. And since Mimimi was a fairly formidable opponent, it would be a mistake to leave such an important role to me.

“Yes. I think it would be better training for you to be Mimimi’s manager instead of mine.”

“Right... Wait, what?!” I yelped at this unexpected announcement.

“Quiet. This way, you’ll still be getting some training.”

“It’s not that... You’re saying since Mimimi is your opponent, instead of giving up on the idea altogether, I should work for her?”

“Right.”

“Wait a second; back up. That’ll be even harder. I don’t know if she’ll say yes, and she’s running against you! I’m not exactly a secret weapon, especially not against such a strong opponent. Seems to me you’d level the playing field if you gave yourself a handicap by taking me for yourself.”

Her face remained neutral as she listened to my argument. “Shall I put it like this?”

“Huh?”

She spoke slowly, indicating that this was important. “If you’re my manager and I happen to lose, you’ll be blamed for everything.”

“...Oh.”

I had to agree. No one thought Hinami would lose. If she did, it would be considered an anomaly. People would start asking why, and the majority of them would conclude that the creepy weirdo who managed her campaign was to blame. Even I could easily imagine that happening. And if it did, I’d become infamous throughout the entire school.

“Of course, I would never lose unless I wanted to. Plus, joining Mimimi’s team will give you more chances to talk to her, and that’ll be good conversation practice. It’s perfect really; if you wanna steal conversational tactics from anyone, it’s Mimimi.”

“...I can see your point, but what if I get blamed for Mimimi’s loss?”

Hinami stared at me blankly and blinked a number of times. Then, seeming to realize something, she answered.

“I like Mimimi, and there’s a lot I respect about her. She’s an important person in my life. But.”

“But...”

Hinami’s expression didn’t change a hair. She spoke her next words as if they were entirely obvious.

“She can’t beat me.”

The statement was delivered with utter finality. A chill went down my spine.

“O-oh.”

“So it doesn’t matter who her manager is.”

I know how hard she works behind the scenes, so I couldn’t very well argue back.

“But never mind all that. Point is, you join Mimimi’s team to practice conversation. I never imagined Mimimi would run, but this is a great opportunity for you.”

“Oh. So that’s what you’re after.”

From that perspective, being Mimimi’s manager might be a good idea after all.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Since the deadline for changing the campaign manager is tomorrow morning, you should find Mimimi now and tell her you want to be the one to represent her.”

“So that’s why you brought me here,” I said, still doubtful. “How am I supposed to convince her?”

“Figure that out yourself. You just need something to tempt her.”

“Um, I, uh, don’t think I can...”

As I sputtered in protest, Hinami briskly walked out.

“Wait!” I called, hurrying after her. *Damn, guess I have to do this.*

And then.

I was in the hallway at the end of lunch break when I spotted Mimimi coming out of the cafeteria with Tama-chan.

“Mi-Mimimi.”

Better be careful, since stuttering on Mimimi’s name ends up adding a fourth *mi*.

“What’s up, Tomozaki?” Mimimi answered cheerfully.

“Um, I wanted to talk to you...”

Recently, we’d been chatting now and then, so I wasn’t super nervous, but still, I was pushing my limits.

“Really?! What?! Did you want to tell me who you like?!”

“N-no way!!”

Mimimi cackled happily. She had me wrapped around her finger, but I managed to come out with my proposal.

“Hmmm.”

“...Believe it or not, I’m actually not half bad at this stuff...”

“Really?!” Mimimi grinned. “I’m happy you want to do it, but...”

“B-but what...?”

She winked teasingly. “I’m not sure I can count on you!”

My bubble just popped. Of course it did!!

After school, I met with Hinami again.

“Hey, what was that all about?!”

I’d taken on the challenge of doing as she said, and I’d fallen on my face. Since she was so insistent, I’d trusted she knew something I didn’t that would give me an advantage, but as it turned out, that something didn’t exist.

“Well, I predicted this would happen.”

“Hey!”

What was she trying to do?!

“Calm down. Mimimi already turned in the name of her supporter, so you were basically doomed from the start. But it would have been the best way for you to efficiently gain EXP while I was busy with the election. If she’d agreed, you would have benefited. If she didn’t, I’d give you some assignments to do on your own.”

Well, that did make sense.

“...Oh, that’s what you were thinking. I can see that...but still, you should have told me!”

“When we went shopping, I saw what happened when I stood back, so I thought that this time I’d better push you a little so it wouldn’t happen again.”

“Oof...” I couldn’t say much to that.

“But if that plan won’t work...as far as things you can do while you’re training alone, well, you can talk to your love interest, Fukachan, as much as possible, or you can talk with Yuzu and Mizusawa and try to pick up some skills.”

“Yeah, guess so.”

“Right. Well, I hate to lose the time, but during the campaign period, you’ll be training on your own. Let me know if anything comes up... I should be able to meet after school on Wednesday, so we’ll talk then.”

Independent study, huh? Well, lately I’d been taking initiative even when the coach wasn’t around, so I doubted it would be a total loss.

“Got it.”

“Make sure you tell me about stuff before it blows up. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“...Okay, then,” Hinami said, sounding a little grumpy. “That’s it for today.”

“Okay.”

And so began my independent study.

* * *

The next morning, campaigning started.

“I’m supporting Nanami-san for student council president because we’re on the track team together! She always helps the younger members and keeps our spirits high, and since she’s really good at that, um, I thought she could really liven up the whole school! And that’s why I’m supporting her! And her campaign platform...”

“Vote for me! Good morning! Vote for me!”

Mimimi and a girl who apparently was a year behind her on the track team were standing outside the school gates shouting at people. With the younger student giving a speech and Mimimi talking to people as they went in, the mood was very peppy.

The girl giving the speech had a very loud voice and stood up very straight and dignified, creating energy outside the school like a cheerleader. She stumbled over her words a couple of times, probably because she was nervous. But she was doing pretty well if she was already that confident in high school. If Mimimi had accepted my offer... The thought of myself standing in her place made me shudder.

“Hey, Tomozaki! Good morning!” Mimimi waved dramatically at me.

“G-good morning.”

“What do you think?” she asked, pointing to her campaign sash. She was as cheerful as always. “Oh, this is my manager! She’s on the track team with me!”

“I was just thinking you made the right choice... There’s no way I could do what she’s doing.”

“She’s got a loud voice, right?! We’ve been friends since junior

high!”

“Thank you!! I’m Yumiko Yamashita!!”

“Ah-ha-ha...”

Yamashita-san thanked Mimimi for the compliment on her voice by dialing up her volume even more. Mimimi was right; volume and vocal quality were important when giving speeches. No matter how good the content, it was pointless if no one could hear you. On that count, Yamashita-san was perfect for the job.

“But thanks for your offer, Tomozaki! A bunch of people turned me down because it’s an annoying job...like Nakamu.”

“Y-you asked Nakamura?”



He did seem likely to say no... Yeah, he definitely wouldn't want to put up with all this.

"But if anything comes up, I'll come to you!"

"Right, if there's anything I can help with."

I tried to make my smile look as natural as possible. *If there's anything I can help with.* That sounded like something a normie would say, right? *Not bad,* I thought as I nodded at Mimimi and headed toward the school building. Nakamura had been asked by Mimimi and turned her down, while I'd asked her myself and gotten shot down. In other words, he'd completely crushed me. Well, that was unavoidable. Yeah.

As I was walking from the gate toward the entrance to the school, I saw a large crowd of students. Hinami's supporter was giving a speech.

"Which is to say, an era of change is about to begin, one that will meet the needs of all students, with Aoi Hinami-san, the super heroine of Sekitomo High School, at the helm. To all of you who have gathered here this morning—to you who just pushed your glasses up! Yes, you! And to you who just yawned! You will be the witnesses to history as we take this giant step forward! Hinami-san's outstanding intellect, popularity, and looks will... Oh, excuse me! Looks are irrelevant, I suppose!"

The crowd laughed at the speaker's weird impression of an old-fashioned speaking style. Unlike Mimimi's manager, Hinami's spoke at a normal volume, but for some reason his voice carried extraordinary force. Each word was clear and easy to understand, but the speech's flow was still smooth. Nothing about it sounded stilted. I knew this voice.

It was Mizusawa's.

"Jokes aside, however, I am utterly serious. Flexibility is crucial—to have fun in the fun times and be tough in the tough times. Oh, hello, Ms. Kobayakawa, you still haven't fixed that rickety chair in the cooking classroom? Aoi Hinami is the candidate who will start with those little things and use her planning skills and energy to get to the root of the problems at this school!"

"Ooh, very nice!"

Ms. Kobayakawa smiled, apparently enjoying the speech.

Mizusawa's speech patterns, vocal projection, and intonation were subtly playful, like he was a comic at a stand-up show. He wasn't stiff, and there was something about him that drew people in. So Hinami had chosen Mizusawa as her manager? Well, that was fine. As I listened to him, I had to admit he was the perfect man for the job.

Hinami stood to the side of the crowd Mizusawa had attracted,

drumming up support face-to-face. A nerdy first-year student was shaking hands with her.

“Thank you for your support!” she said.

“Y-you’re welcome!!”

“You’re in the tennis club...right?”

“Uh, um, y-yes...but how did you...?”

“I thought I saw you volleying one day when I was at track practice! So it was you!”

“Um...uh-huh...”

“Stop by again!”

With that, Hinami ended the handshake. The boy stared excitedly at his hand, nodded, and squeezed it in a fist. He was head over heels. What nerd wouldn’t be, if Hinami talked to him for that long?

But seriously, how did she do it? She couldn’t possibly have memorized the club activities of every student in the school, but she must have gotten damn close. I noticed that a couple of people had lined up to shake her hand. What was going on? She was like an actual celebrity.

Watching everything unfold out of the corner of my eye, I skirted the crowd and headed into the building. That’s when it struck me.

She’s right. No one can beat her.

When I got to class, I made sure to complete my independent study assignment by talking to Izumi.

“Did you see Hinami outside?”

Izumi pivoted perkily toward me. “Yeah! That crowd was amazing.”

“She’s just so strong.”

That was my honest impression.

“Yeah...”

Even though Izumi had agreed, I could tell she wasn’t saying everything. I wondered what else she was thinking... It probably had to do with Mimimi and her campaign nearby. Honestly, anyone could see she didn’t stand a chance. The problem wasn’t with Mimimi. It was just that Hinami was too good. I hadn’t known Mimimi for long, but with her communication skills, popularity, and personality, she could easily be student council president—if Hinami wasn’t here. Unfortunately, she was up against the wrong opponent.

“Anyway, here!”

Maybe because she felt uncomfortable and wanted to change the subject, Izumi handed me the broken stopwatch I’d given her.

“Hey, so this means...!”

“I mastered the short hops!”

She gave me a formal salute and a rather odd smile. She was

probably feeling awkward. What should I say in this situation? I thought back to my conversation with Mizusawa to find an idea for something normie-ish to say.

“What’s that face you’re making?”

“Jerk!”

Now we’re talking like good friends! *Wow! Mizusawa, you’re amazing!*

If I kept up this kind of experimentation, I’d see significant growth during my independent study period.

But when I was talking to Izumi later, and she said she was going to work hard, I tried the Mizusawa tease again and said she was talking too loudly. That time, she just said, “Oh, sorry,” and got all quiet. *Yeah, I need to try harder. I’m the one who should be saying sorry.*

So the day progressed with me getting on the horse and falling off over and over until school was out.

Hinami and I weren’t meeting that day, and there wasn’t any way for me to practice having conversations or adjusting my tone, so I figured I’d go straight home for the first time in forever and work on my facial expressions. As I left school, I bumped into Mimimi. She was campaigning alone. Where was her manager?

Well, well, looks like I just found myself an impromptu independent study assignment, I thought to myself like some character from a crime movie. I called out to Mimimi.

“What are you up to?”

“Oh, Tomozaki! Here you go!” She handed me a small piece of paper. “...That’s my platform.”

I looked down at the paper. A list of campaign promises was typed out on it.

- 1. Encourage students to greet one another, creating a friendlier and more positive school environment.**
- 2. Install a suggestion box for student ideas to use to improve the school.**
- 3. Expand the selection at the school store**
- 4. Expand the scale of the sports festival.**

“What do you think?”

“What do I think? Uh...”

In truth, a few things about it bothered me. Or I should say, I wondered why she hadn’t noticed any problems. But that wasn’t a very positive comment, so I wasn’t sure if I should say anything.

“What do you think of my platform? Does it make you wanna vote

for me?"

What should I do?

If I didn't say anything, I doubted I could come up with a good excuse or cover up my real feelings, and then it would get awkward. On the other hand, I knew I could say what was on my mind. That was my only strength starting out, and by now I knew how to use my face and voice to deliver it more effectively.

"Uh...", I said, still waffling. I decided to go for it. "It's just, the platform...well, the way you've written it is..."

"What do you mean?" Mimimi looked very confused. Of course.

"I mean...look at this." I pointed calmly to the fourth point. "Here."

Mimimi gazed gravely at the paper.

"What? That's totally normal," she said, peering at me. *Damn she's close.* Normies always get so close. Her attractive face was right in front of my eyes. I froze for a moment.

"Um...well, the font here is smaller than everywhere else..."

"...Oh! You're right! Wow, Tomozaki! Are you a detective or something?"

"Also...this part."

I pointed to the comma after the 1.

"What?"

"See, all the other ones use a period, right? But this one has a comma. It was probably just a typo..."

"Oh wow, you're right!"

"People who pay attention to those things will notice it right away and think it's sloppy. That won't make a very good impression. I mean, I don't think it will, but that's just my opinion."

I didn't have anything that really qualified me to point out things like this, so I tried to keep it modest. A couple of other little things were bothering me, too, but I didn't mention them.

Mimimi looked at me with a sparkle in her eye. "...Tomozaki, are you one of those types who's secretly super good at something?"

"Uh, no..."

I just spend so much time on the computer playing games, I tend to notice those minor details.

But now that I thought about it, I realized Mimimi tended to just go with the flow, and her campaign manager didn't seem overly obsessed with details, either. Which meant...maybe I could be useful? Right then, a flash of inspiration struck.

I had Hinami's assignment about advancing my ideas, plus her original plan A of making me into Mimimi's manager. Why not put the two together and take them a step further?

"Mimimi."

“Yeah?”

I hesitated for a second, then continued. “I think I can serve as the brain of this operation.”

Mimimi gaped at me.

“...B-brain!” She lit up. Did that mean she liked my idea?

“You’re not great at the details, right? I could take care of all that for you. Especially anything that has to do with computers.”

Mimimi nodded quietly as I laid out how this would be in her best interest.

“That’s not a bad idea. You’re right that details aren’t my strong suit...and...”

“And?”

Mimimi looked at me brightly before answering excitedly. “I just like how it sounds! ‘The Brain’!!”

“Huh?”

“It’s great; I love it! That way I can be like, ‘I need my brain!’ God, I want to say that! And wouldn’t you love to say, ‘I’m the brain!’? I bet you would!”

Her different voices when she was imitating us reminded me faintly of Hinami. But was she really basing her decision on how the word sounded? Guess I could kind of understand that...

“A-are you serious?”

“That’s half-right! The other half is that I’m just following my gut!”

Huh? “So about my idea...”

“Yes! Let’s do it! Actually, I might really be glad to have your help. Yumi-chan’s not around after school.”

“Yumi-chan?”

“The girl who was here this morning! Since we’re on the track team together, I want her to go to practice after school. So while she’s busy, I’ll campaign by myself! After all, I’m the candidate, so I’ve got to do the lion’s share!”

“Ah, right.” She sure was a nice teammate.

“That’s why it would be great to have your help after school. Of course, I did turn you down once! Tee-hee!”

The “Tee-hee” came out loud and clear even though she was sticking her tongue out.

But this was great. Now my independent study would be even more productive—although this was a little scary.

“Okay, so what should I do today?”

“Love the enthusiasm! Such a diligent worker!”

She slapped me on the shoulder a little harder than she should’ve. Ouch.

But here we go! I failed at becoming her manager, but I did become her

brain. And I made my second successful suggestion. Better late than never!
Assignment completed. Bet Hinami can't complain now!

"Um, Tomozaki? Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

Mimimi peered into my eyes. "Why are you so eager to help out?"

Once she said it, I realized the question made sense. I'd asked to be her manager, and she'd turned me down. Then I said I wanted to be the brain of the operation. Anyone would wonder why I was being so persistent. Crap, what now? If I told her the truth, I'd have to say Hinami had told me to—that, to be precise, I wanted to learn conversation skills, but there was no way I could say that... As I grasped for an answer, inspiration struck again.

"It's Hinami—"

"Huh?"

Once again, the justification flowed from my lips with surprising smoothness. "I want to take her down."

As I said the words, I realized I meant both in real life and as nanashi fighting NO NAME.

"What?"

Mimimi blinked her big eyes and stared at me. I kept talking.

"She's, like, invincible. I mean, she's OP. I think she could stand to lose once in her life... I like gaming, and with games, the stronger the opponent, the more you want to win. So I thought it would be awesome if we could fight her and win."

Mimimi listened seriously. "...Tomozaki."

"Yeah?"

"You're insanely full of yourself."

"L-leave me alone!"

Of course, she was right; the gap was so big, we didn't stand a chance right now. She smiled from ear to ear.

"And that's a good thing! Just between you and me, I'm full of myself, too!"

"Really? You?"

"Yup. Totally!" She grinned. "After all, I want to beat Aoi!"

I couldn't tell if she was acting or not; the far-off look in her eyes was confusing me.

"R-really?"

"Anyway, I'm happy about this! I thought I'd have a chance if I worked really hard, but did you see Aoi and Takahiro this morning?"

"Yeah, sure did." They were incredible.

"To be honest, when I saw them...I felt like I didn't have a chance."

There was a shade of humiliation in her smile.

"...Yeah."

Anyone who saw their perfect campaign rally would have felt the same.

"I was just thinking I'd lose for sure if I went on like this. I have to change something. So this worked out perfectly! Change something for me! I'm counting on you, Tomozaki!"

She pummeled my shoulder again.

"Ow! Um, right, I'll get on it..." I felt like her expectations were way too high.

"Our first meeting starts now!"

"Okay!"

Even though I was the one to suggest all this, Mimimi was already taking the reins.

* * *

"Here's where you change the font size."

"Oh yeah, right! Um..."

"Should I type?"

"Yes, please... Wow, you type fast! I knew you'd be good at computer stuff."

We were in the school computer lab. Mimimi was appreciating the typing skills I'd honed in online gaming chat rooms. I'm not really that fast—I'm actually relatively slow—but apparently normal people are impressed by this skill. By the way, I was doing my best to interpret the "I knew" before the "you'd be good at computer stuff" in a positive light.

"How's this?"

I showed the screen to Mimimi.

- 1. Encourage students to greet one another, creating a friendlier and more positive school environment.**
- 2. Install a suggestion box for student ideas to improve the school.**
- 3. Expand the selection at the school store.**
- 4. Expand the scale of the sports festival.**

"Oh wow! What did you do? It's super easy to read now!"

"Right?"

Just as I'd suspected, a couple of little changes made a big difference.

"Did you do something aside from the period and the font size? It looks like you changed the layout or something..." Mimimi stared intently at the screen.

“It’s probably this,” I said, pointing to the first point. “The text takes up two lines, so I created a hanging indent on the second line to isolate the numbers in the list.”

The layout had been pretty sloppy to start with.

Mimimi pulled the original version out of a clear file folder and compared the two.

“You’re right! And you changed the second point, too.”

“Oh yeah. One word was hanging over onto the next line, so I shortened it up a bit to fit on one line.”

That lone word on its own line was making the text harder to read, so I deleted “to use.”

“Wow! You’re way more on top of things than I expected. Very surprising!”

“Well, at least you’re honest.” *I guess that’s how people see me...*

“Great! Let’s print this baby out!”

“Uh, wait a second.” I wanted to make another suggestion.

“Why?”

As I thought about various ways she might be able to win the election, I felt like I was building a strategy with my available skills to take down a boss.

“You’re handing that flyer out mostly to students, right?”

“Basically. Sometimes I give one to a teacher, too!”

“In that case,” I muttered. “...You don’t need this.”

“Don’t need what?”

I looked Mimimi straight in the eye, then got embarrassed by her perfect features and looked away.

“...Your first campaign promise, about greetings to make the school friendlier and more positive. Most students aren’t going to care about that. I don’t think you’ll get much mileage with that.”

“Oh, you’re right!”

Basically, nobody wants everyone in their school to say hi to them.

“If you’re only giving a few of these to teachers and the rest to students, it would be better not to give any to teachers and focus on campaign promises that students will like.”

It was like choosing between magic or physical attacks, fire or water. It was Gaming 101—know your enemy and use the skills that would be super effective.

“Hmm, that might be a good idea!” Mimimi seemed convinced, and a second later, she said, “I’ll do it!”

Nice. Glad I’m a gamer.

But then I remembered one of my conversations with Hinami.

“If you’re confident your suggestion is right, and you’ve learned about

a 'bad rule' that says suggestions won't be accepted just because they're right... If you want to make an impact, you have to make use of the bad rule."

In a sense, that was what I was trying to do. Students wanted campaign promises that made life at school easier. From one perspective, it would be hard to call that a "good" rule. My strategy was to make a campaign platform that took advantage of that rule to get more votes. But in this case, we wouldn't just be camouflaging our real intent with a surface change. We'd be changing the actual platform. In other words, if Mimimi had some things she wanted to do as student council president—some things she thought were right—then changing the platform could fundamentally impact her ability to accomplish them.

Normally, people didn't choose to run for student council president unless they were super serious. This time around, she was also fighting a tough opponent like Hinami. Mimimi probably had some reason for doing it, and I had to make sure the platform we were putting together right then didn't contradict that reason.

"First I have to ask you something."

"Really? What?"

I looked at Mimimi's face again. As usual, her perfect features made me feel awkward, but it would be weird not to look at her when I said what I planned to say, so I forced myself to maintain eye contact as I continued.

"Why did you decide to run for student council president?"

Mimimi froze for an instant at such a direct question. "You want to ask me about that right now?!" She looked half embarrassed and half surprised.

"I just think it would kinda suck if the changes we made to your platform went against something you really wanted to achieve."

"Oh, yeah. That does make sense."

"Also, I've just been wondering. I mean, with Hinami running and everything."

"...Aha, that's what I thought," she said with a cynical smile. She looked a little lonely—not at all like the Mimimi I knew.

"...What do you mean?"

"You know, about Aoi." She was back to her usual playful self.

"And that means...?"

"Um...oh right! My reason for running. It's the same as yours for wanting to help me!"

"The same...?" Then it clicked. "Oh."

She wanted to try to beat Hinami. The same reason I'd given her for wanting to be her "brain."

“I want to see if I can fight someone like Aoi and win! That’s why I’m running.”

“Which means you don’t want to change the school or achieve any specific goals...”

“Nope, nothing like that!” She poked her pointer finger into the air.

“...Ah-ha-ha, that’s surprising.”

Suddenly, I was a little glad. Never would have guessed our motivation would be the same. I almost asked her why she wanted to beat Aoi, but I figured she must have something similar to my gamer’s pride in her, so I decided not to. I didn’t have the skills to push the conversation that hard.

“Like I said, I’m full of myself!”

“In that case, we can come up with any platform and campaign strategy we want?”

“Pretty much! Honestly, you’ve been doing so well at this brain thing, I kinda want to leave it all up to you!”

This time she had both pointer fingers in the air.

“Really? ...In that case,” I said, running through ideas in my head. “...This is gonna be easy.”

“That face is terrifying, Tomozaki.” She smiled excitedly.

Terrifying? Yeah, I bet. I just realized something.

Aoi Hinami is the strongest player in the game of life. I’d learned some strategies from her, and now I was playing them myself. I hadn’t decided yet if it was a god-tier game or whatever, but at the very least I was starting to think it was a good one.

And that was why I’d started to get greedy.

One of these days, I wanted to fight the infamous superboss Aoi Hinami in a game that would give me a fair shot. And I didn’t just want to fight her—I wanted to beat her.

But I was still a bottom-tier character. If I was fumbling through conversations, there was no way I could make convincing campaign speeches. Mimimi’s manager, Yamashita-san, had terrific energy, Mizusawa was an incredible public speaker, and Mimimi and Hinami were popular and great at communication. I didn’t measure up to any of them. My stats just weren’t there. But...

Maybe I could pull the strings from backstage.

I was the strongest *Atafami* gamer around, and I’d learned some life strategies from Hinami.

What if I could control the top-tier character Mimimi in order to fight Hinami?

If I did that, wouldn’t bottom-tier character Tomozaki become nanashi in real life, too?

I’ll give Hinami a run for her money. No—I’ll beat her.

That thought excited me.

“Mimimi.”

“What?”

I wanted to share that excitement with her. “If we’re gonna do this, let’s win for real.”

She stared at me for a moment, apparently surprised by my sudden passion for the cause. Finally, she smiled her usual brilliant smile.

“...Damn right!”

She pounded me vigorously on the shoulder. *I told you that hurts!*

* * *

“Okay, assuming the flyer is in good shape, we need to think about the rest of our plan...”

“Couldn’t we just hand this out?”

“Maybe under normal circumstances, but your opponent is Hinami.”

“Oh right.”

We were talking strategy as we cut the printed flyers down to size. I looked at one of them and smiled cynically.

- 1. Expand the items for sale at the cafeteria and school store.**
- 2. Relax the rules about hairstyles and school uniforms, thereby improving student vitality and independence.**
- 3. Petition to allow students on the roof during lunchtime.**
- 4. Boost enthusiasm and energy by inviting celebrities to the culture festival as special guests.**

“We’re really pandering to the students now.”

“True! You’re surprisingly evil, Tomozaki!” Mimimi covered her mouth with her hand and giggled mischievously.

“Oh, no, I’m playing clean!”

It was true. This was nanashi’s playstyle—use everything at your disposal.

“Are you really?” Mimimi said, looking surprised but happy. “Seriously, though, anyone who sees this is gonna love it!”

“Well, they’ll probably still peg some of it as campaign rhetoric.”

“Ah-ha-ha! That can work, too!”

“I think so.”

“I like the excuses in case a teacher sees it—it’s terrible! You’re an evil agent!”

“What can I say?”

Mimimi laughed. She was right; I'd kept our campaign promises to stuff that would be easy to defend as "supporting school spirit and student convenience" in case a teacher had questions.

"So now we have to think about what else to do?"

"...Yeah." I'd already come up with some ideas. "Between now and your big speech, we've got to gather a number of supporters to rival Hinami's."

Her big speech was the one she'd give in front of the entire student body this coming Friday. If we let Hinami establish a better image than us between now and then, we'd lose even on the off chance that Mimimi gained an upper hand in the speech.

The problem was, Mimimi was going to have a hard time gaining more supporters than Hinami with the usual tactics. We only had four days, and that included today. Honestly speaking, Mizusawa was far and away a better public speaker than Yamashita-san. Hinami, meanwhile, wasn't just working hard this very minute. She had her established good reputation to go on, plus the crazy level of effort she'd already put into things like memorizing facts about every student.

Closing the gap was going to be hard. Since skill was built from previous effort, experience, and inborn talent, trying to fight back now would be a drop in the bucket. If we didn't find a manager who could give better rally speeches than Mizusawa and make Mimimi more popular than Hinami, we wouldn't be able to close the gap. Either of those things would be tough to do. Impossible, frankly.

Hinami had accumulated an overwhelming number of advantages; that was just who she was.

In short, NO NAME's playstyle was to overpower the enemy with effort.

In which case, nanashi had to take her obvious advantage as a given and figure out how to storm the castle from behind.

To hatch my strategy, I probed Mimimi and her connections for insider information about school clubs and teams. Then, at my suggestion, we left the computer lab and headed for the gym, where the volleyball and basketball teams were practicing. When I told her what we were going to do, Mimimi smiled teasingly and said, "Ooh, Tomozaki, you really are bad!"

No, I'm not! In a way, this is about as orthodox as it gets.

We arrived at the gym. I looked around and spotted Tama-chan walking across the volleyball court with a ball. Guess size doesn't matter for that sport. I could have said hello, but that wasn't my goal right now, so I left the niceties to Mimimi.

Following the plan we'd discussed, Mimimi went up to the captain

of the boys' basketball team and started chatting with him. He was muscular and handsome—a normie, by all appearances. I stood back at a distance that would allow me to keep from physically shrinking away from him.

“Hey, Sasaki!”

“Huh? Mimimi? What’s up?” The guy she’d called Sasaki walked across the court to her.

“I’m campaigning!”

Mimimi put her hands on her hips and stuck out her chest. The wrinkles in her shirt emphasizing her big boobs naturally drew my eyes, but Sasaki didn’t even glance downward. Witness the power of the normie.

“Yeah, I heard you were running. Working hard, eh?”

“Oh, you know! Hard work is my saving grace!”

“Nerd!”

Normies—you never know when someone’s gonna call someone else a nerd. I almost got cold feet right then and there.

“Actually, I came to negotiate.”

“Negotiate?”

“Yeah. Like, if I push for this policy, you’ll vote for me!”

“Huh. To be brutally honest, I’m planning to vote for Aoi.”

“Nooo, don’t say that!” Mimimi covered her ears with her hands jokingly.

“So, what? You said something about policies?”

“Yes! Policies!”

“Geez, you’re loud.”

“Just listen! The big picture is...I’m going to push for the school to buy electric ball pumps. Do I have your vote?” As she announced the offer, Mimimi smiled deviously.

“Are you serious?!”

Sasaki took the bait big-time.

Yup, an electric ball pump. That was my strategy.

Develop a platform that brought strong benefits to specific clubs and solidify support among their members. Pork barrel politics. It’s a legitimate campaign strategy.

“I’m very serious. Anything to give our sports teams a leg up! Which reminds me, it’s not just for the basketball team. You’ll be sharing it with the volleyball, soccer, and handball teams.”

The pump would bring strong benefits to all four teams, and that’s why I’d chosen it. At a couple hundred dollars, it was within the realm of genuine possibility, and it would let students skip the drudgery of blowing up balls. Nothing would make the sports kids happier.

“I’m in.”

“An honest vote for Mimimi! And not just yours, of course?”

“Ha-ha, okay. The pump’s a sure thing, right?”

“Leave it to me!”

“Awesome. I’ll let the guys know.”

He gestured to the court with his chin. There looked to be a little under thirty members on the team. If 80 percent of them agreed to the plan, that would be at least twenty votes for us.

“Thanks!”

With that, Mimimi had snapped up her first new votes. Partly it was thanks to my pork-barrel plan, but it was probably more due to Mimimi’s communication skills. If I was the one doing the negotiating, he probably would have turned me down based on the law of the non-normie: “Creepy, gross, and ugly.” Even if he didn’t turn me down, I’m so weak-kneed, it would probably get flipped around on me somehow. He might even think I was being underhanded. At the very least, he wouldn’t have gotten that favorable “partners in crime” vibe like he did with Mimimi. The source of the problem was the usual suspect: me.

As I was thinking about all this, Mimimi looked over at Tama-chan with a glint in her eye.

“Tama! Small as always, I see!”

With that, she dashed toward Tama-chan and glomped her.

“Minmi?! What are you doing barging onto the court?!”

“Sorry to intrude!” she said, flipping up the bottom of Tama-chan’s T-shirt and nuzzling inside with her face. *What the hell is she doing?*

Mimimi stuck her head out the collar so that two heads were now sticking out of the shirt. What was going on?

“Minmi, you’re making it too tight! I don’t get you!”

“We’re two peas in a pod!”

“Come on!”

An older girl on the team walked over and bopped Mimimi on the head. Apparently she’d had enough. “What do you think you’re doing, Nanami?”

“M-my darling Shiori-senpai!!”

Mimimi’s eyes glittered even brighter at Shiori’s arrival, and she started in that direction. However, since she was still inside Tama-chan’s shirt, she was hardly able to move. “You’re right... I’m stuck,” she muttered. Shiori sighed and looked at Mimimi.

“And whose fault would that be?”

“Oh right, yeah! Tee-hee!”

With that, she pulled her head back inside Tama-chan’s shirt and started wriggling down in an attempt to get out.

“Eek!” Tama-chan shrieked. No doubt Mimimi had done something to her.

A second later, Mimimi emerged from the shirt. “Bleh! Ah, the fresh air is wonderful!” She spread her arms wide and smiled.

Tama-chan gripped her stomach in a daze. “D-did that just happen?!”

“A-are you okay, Natsubayashi?”

Tama-chan’s teammate peered at her with concern.

“My belly button...,” Tama-chan whispered. She sounded embarrassed.

“B-belly button?”

“She licked my belly bu—”

“What is wrong with you, you idiot?!” Shiori interrupted Tama-chan to poke Mimimi.

“I am not an idiot! Today I come bearing good news for the volleyball team!”

“Huh?”

Taking advantage of the chaos, Mimimi bulldozed over Shiori with the same explanation she’d given Sasaki a couple minutes earlier.

“...And that’s how I’m planning to give a shot in the arm to Sekitomo High School’s sports teams!”

“Pfft... All right, fine. If that’s your deal, we’ll help out. The track team needs to stop getting all the perks.”

“Thank you very much, Shiori-senpai! You’re the best!”

Once again, she’d easily pushed her idea through. Yup, a top-tier character really does make the conversation go much more smoothly.

Mimimi was amazing. Halfway through her exchange with Shiori and Tama-chan, some younger girls on the team had already gathered around her.

“Mimimi-senpai!”

“I heard you’re running!”

“I’m voting for you!”

How in the world did she know all these people in different grades and on different teams?

Meanwhile, I was struggling to hold my own under the stares that seemed to shout, “Who is that guy who’s been lurking around the gym this whole time?” A bottom-tier character had no purpose in this situation, so there wasn’t much else I could do.

As we were getting ready to leave the gym, Mimimi turned to Tama-chan again.

“By the way, Tama, check your back.”

“My back... Huh?” Tama-chan said, glaring at Mimimi. “...Min... mi?”

Her cheeks flushing and deep resentment filling her eyes, Tama-chan walked over to the wall and started wriggling her back around.

“Wh-what did you do?” I whispered to Mimimi.

“Magic fingers!” she said, pinching her pointer and middle fingers and thumb together and then releasing them.

Shiori must have guessed her meaning. “You did that while you were licking her? Good with your hands, I see.” She sounded half impressed and half annoyed.

What??

Mimimi never did tell me what she’d done.

After that, we went outside to the field and talked to the soccer and handball teams, and by the end of the day, we had more than a hundred committed voters.

* * *

On the way home, Mimimi walked next to me, chatting cheerfully.

“That worked so great! You get things done, Tomozaki!”

“No, it was all you... Without your negotiating skills, that would have been impossible.”

We were going home together. I guess that was natural, since we both get off at the same station. This was the second time just the two of us were going home together, but I still wasn’t prepared for it.

“Think the odds are evened up a little?”

“Yeah, should be. At the very least, we’re on the playing field now...I think.”

I tried to hide how nervous I was. I’d just built up Mimimi’s hopes, kind of, but was that hope really justified? Sekitomo High School had almost six hundred students. To tell the truth, a hundred or so supporters weren’t enough. In a normal election it might be, but we were going up against Hinami. We were still at a disadvantage. *What should we do about it...?*



Unfortunately, I was so nervous about walking home with Mimimi that I couldn't think straight. But as we walked along side by side, I realized that even though she was crushing me at the game of life, I was taller and more muscular than her... I don't know how to put this exactly, and I guess it's obvious, but I noticed that she was a girl.

"What are you staring at me for? Did you want to tell me about your crush after all?!"

"That's not it!" I retorted in a panic.

Mimimi smiled brightly and swung her bag, jingling all the little charms on it.

"...What's that?"

I looked at one figurine with weirdly colored stripes on it. It looked like one of those ancient clay sculptures called haniwa. Had she always had that on her bag?

"You've got a good eye! I fell in love with this the other day and had to buy it!"

"Huh, really?"

It was pretty weird-looking. I didn't know what to say.

"What do you think? Cute, right?!"

"Cute?!" I said, surprised. She thought that was cute? I decided to try out the same Mizusawa-style teasing I'd used on Izumi. "No way, it's super weird!"

"What? Aw, come on! It's super cute!" Mimimi laughed.

Look at us, being all buddy-buddy. Mizusawa, you're amazing. This shit really works.

"I mean...it looks like a haniwa."

"That's what's cute about it! You just don't get it."

Mimimi pouted, but she still sounded like she was having fun. *That is an amazing technique, Mizusawa. But in all seriousness, that thing is definitely not cute.*

"Anyway, back to the election! What should we do tomorrow? Tomozaki the Brain, your thoughts?"

She held an imaginary microphone to my mouth.

"Uh...let's see. In our current situation..."

I thought about it.

What did we have to do to win this election? How could we catch the flawless NO NAME off guard?

The core of this battle was the difference between Mimimi's and Hinami's perspectives of the fight. To be blunt, Hinami had her guard down. I don't mean to say she was foolish enough to ease up on her efforts. It was more of a valid—but mistaken—assumption that we weren't going to fight that hard.

People typically think of the goal in an election as gathering more

votes than their opponent. Hinami probably assumed that was what Mimimi hoped to achieve with her plan of action. Simple and straightforward. And until I became her brain, that was true.

Hinami's best strategy for an overwhelming victory in that situation was to do the same and focus on gathering lots of votes. If she had a great advantage and more resources than Mimimi before the election even started—to the point that Mimimi couldn't close the gap—then simply fighting her with the same techniques on the same battlefield would virtually assure her a victory.

And sure enough, Hinami was working this very moment to pull in more voters than Mimimi. That strategy matched up with NO NAME's pattern of using overwhelming effort to charge her enemy head-on.

In other words, we couldn't win on those terms. Hinami had a monopoly over that arena and those fighting methods. Our only choice was to toss them out the window.

That's why I made a different proposal to Mimimi before we headed to the gym to buy votes.

“Let's make our goal to get fifty-five percent.”

Right from the start, we'd forget about getting as many supporters as possible. We'd give up on 45 percent of the electorate. Instead, we'd devote everything we had to getting the other 55. While Hinami focused on getting every last student to support her, we'd be trying to solidify our support among that narrow majority. With that strategy, even if Hinami was twice as strong as us, we'd be able to put up a good fight.

And so I came up with an idea for some very effective campaigning within a limited section of the electorate: the electric pump.

This is how I explained it to Mimimi.

“When it comes to winning an election, getting fifty-one percent of the votes is just as good as getting a hundred percent.”

Whoever got the majority would win. In that sense, anything beyond that was just to boost your ego. Of course, we could assume Hinami knew about that strategy, too. But she was an orthodox player, so she wouldn't choose it. If she knew that Mimimi was planning to toss appearances to the wind and just go for a bare majority, things would be different, but Hinami probably hadn't even considered that.

That's why we'd be able to catch her off guard and attack from behind. In a sense, it was a simple surprise attack. But it also meant we wouldn't be able to defend ourselves if she chose to fight with

other methods. If Hinami took countermeasures against our strategy, it would crumble like a castle made of sand.

But that was fine. It's all about the metagame—whatever strat takes out the previous top strat becomes the new top strat. Happens all the time.

“...Heeey, Earth to Tomozaki! What about tomorrow?”

“Oh right.”

No good, no good. I'd unconsciously dived into my own mental world again.

“Are you having trouble coming up with something?”

“No...I'll think about it.”

I'd run through a lot of ideas, but I still couldn't come up with one that would get us as many committed voters as today's did.

“By the way, why do you want to beat Aoi so badly?”

That one came out of left field.

“Why?” I repeated, a little flustered. “...It's like I said before.”

“Because you like games and stronger opponents make you want to fight more?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“...Is that all?”

Mimimi kept pushing. To tell the truth, it wasn't. I mean, if I liked winning because I liked games, I'd be more competitive at school and sports, so it wasn't a very good explanation. Mimimi was smiling, but she seemed suspicious, so honesty was looking like the best policy. At my current level, just about the only thing I could do was say what was on my mind.

“...I'm really good at *Atafami*.”

“Where did that come from all of a sudden?”

“Well, actually, Hinami is really good at it, too.”

“Aha!” Mimimi said, like she suddenly understood everything. “So you're out for revenge?”

I tilted my head, confused. “Revenge?”

“No? I thought it was because she beat you at your specialty.”

“Oh, right,” I said, smirking. “No, I win at *Atafami*.”

“Wow, really?!”

Apparently, the fact that I was able to beat Hinami at even one thing was surprising.

“Uh-huh. But she's easily the best *Atafami* player I've ever fought. She might even beat me someday, and I've never thought that about anyone else.”

“Ohhh.” Mimimi listened, speechless.

“Thing is, she's crushing me at life. I can't win no matter what I do—I can't even imagine it. Meanwhile, Aoi Hinami is the one person

I respect as an *Atafami* player, and life is her favorite stage.”

“Oh, so life’s like a game.”

I’d say it really is a game, but anyway...

“Uh-huh. And as a gamer, I want to try playing her on her stage, too. But I know I can’t beat her yet...”

“Oh... So that’s why.”

“Right. I thought if you and I worked together, we might be able to beat her.”

“I see. That’s fairly believable.”

I hadn’t outright lied about anything, although I kept my status as the top *Atafami* player in Japan secret out of embarrassment. Needless to say, I also didn’t mention the life lessons from Hinami. Mimimi kept nodding and offering comments like, “Yeah, makes sense, you’re young.”

Damn, she sure pulled a lot of information out of me. Must be a normie conversational skill. *Well then, I’ll copy her.* Hinami did tell me to steal some tricks from Mimimi, and plus, I wanted to know.

“...What about you?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you want to beat Hinami so badly?”

I turned her own question back on her. Plagiarizing is key in conversations. Just like I plagiarized the Mizusawa Method.

“...Well...” Mimimi smiled uncomfortably and looked up. Had my copycat act pushed her too far?

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine! It’s not a big deal.” She scratched her cheek, her gaze still wandering, and continued talking. “Okay, quiz time! What’s the tallest mountain in Japan?” Her usual cheerful expression was back.

Why the sudden perky quiz?

“Pop quiz, huh?” I said, confused. “Mount Fuji, but...”

“Correct! You lucky dog!”

“Uh...huh,” I said, not sure how to respond.

“Okay, next,” Mimimi said, grinning. “What’s the second tallest mountain in Japan?” She peered into my eyes as if she was trying to read my mind.

“Uh, the second? Um, give me a sec...um...”

“Bzzzt! Time’s up! The answer is...Kitadake!” Mimimi stuck two fingers in the air.

“Kitadake? I didn’t know that, actually.”

“Right?” Mimimi said, smiling brightly. “Okay, next question! Who was America’s first president?”

“George Washington.”

“Correct! And...who was the second?” Once again, she spoke

slowly, like she was testing me on something deeper.

“Um...hold on, I’m thinking...”

“Sorry, too slow! It was John Adams. Tomozaki, are you bad at world history?”

“Uh, guess so?”

Since I apparently wasn’t getting her point, Mimimi became slightly more serious than before.

“Okay, next question! Who took first place in the girl’s overall sports test this May?” She smiled gently but meaningfully at me.

“Hinami, right?”

“Correct,” she said, tilting her head a little. “And do you know who took second?” Her eyes met mine.

“...No idea.”

“Thought so. That’s what I’m saying! If you get first place, you become famous, but the instant you drop down to second, your win means almost nothing!”

Almost nothing. I started to see what she was getting at.

“So the person who took second in that sports test...”

For just a moment, Mimimi looked lonely and uncomfortable, but then her usual cheer returned.

“Exactly! That person was me, Minami Nanami! Well? I’m pretty talented myself. Did you know that?”

“N-no.”

“Didn’t think so! That’s what I’m saying. Oh, and by the way, I was also second place academically all the way through first-year finals! I dropped to third and sixth place in the midterms and finals this semester, though.”

Surprising. And considering we go to a college-prep school, genuinely impressive.

“Seriously? You don’t look like the scholarly type.” Overly honest, I know. Blame it on the surprise.

“That was rude!” Mimimi said, cackling. “But no one knows, really. Minami Nanami is one of those beautiful Japanese boys and girls who excels at the literary and military arts.”

“But you’re not a beautiful boy.”

“That’s my Tomozaki, catching the little things! Still, I appreciate that you acknowledge the rest!”

“Shut up!”

I was doing my best to match my comebacks to Mimimi’s quick pace.

“Ah-ha-ha!” She opened her mouth wide to laugh, but the laughter soon faded. “Anyway, that’s the story.”

She looked down, still smiling, and kicked a pebble.

“...Huh.”

I had no idea. Hinami just shone too brightly, and Mimimi had always been hidden in her shadow.

I walked along, unintentionally avoiding eye contact. Mimimi smiled again as she spoke—not her usual overly bright and sparkly smile, but a faint, fleeting one.

“That’s why I want to win.”

* * *

The next day was Wednesday. Mimimi was campaigning in the same spot with Yamashita-san, who seemed to have mellowed slightly. Hinami was campaigning near the second entrance to the school, as opposed to the first entrance, where she’d been before, but she was speaking loudly enough to be heard by students using either door. She had apparently planned for maximum efficiency. Typical Hinami. Normally I would interpret this as a threat, but it was also evidence that she was attempting to win over as many voters as possible, so I took it as encouragement. Our counterattack would sting.

During the break before fourth period, I headed to the library as usual and read with Kikuchi-san...or pretended to. Just like I used to do before we started talking, I was planning strategy. But this time, it was election strategy, not *Atafami* strategy.

Yeah, she *would* want to win.

As far as I could tell, Mimimi’s desire for victory was real. She didn’t want to lose. She wanted to win.

She’d let herself stay second place up till now, unable to beat Hinami. But this time she was determined to change that.

I don’t believe anyone is born with a talent for gaming. If anything, it’s a question of how much they hate losing. And on that front, Mimimi was like me.

In which case, we had to fight.

Maybe my desire to beat NO NAME in real life seems childish, but it was genuine. I’m a gamer after all. Which meant if I didn’t give this fight every last thing I had, I’d regret it afterward.

“...The rules of life: bringing everyone’s interests into agreement, persuading the more vocal people, controlling the mood...”

As I held the book by Michael Andi in front of my face, I closed my eyes like I did when I was strategizing for *Atafami*, abstractly dissecting each life rule Hinami had taught me, reassembling them in concrete terms, visualizing the results, and considering my options.

“Um...did you say something?”

“Oh, no, nothing.”

Kikuchi-san looked at me searchingly. I'd been mumbling out loud. Oops.

"Are you...sure?"

I'm sorry, Kikuchi-san. But I have to win.

At that moment, I was thinking about how to approach Mimimi's big speech. When I had decided to master *Atafami*, the first thing I did was imitate a player named Zero, who in my opinion was the best of the best. Similarly, right now I was trying to imitate Aoi Hinami, the player I thought was best at the game of life.

Aoi probably did the same thing. I don't know how she mastered life. But at least when it came to *Atafami*, she definitely started out by aping my playstyle. After that, she refined the various moves and came up with counterstrategies based on my methods. She was trying to move past me. Start with copying and then refine. I know this because I've played her countless times: Her goal in *Atafami* is extremely simple.

Through sheer effort, she'll refine my fighting methods, execute them more precisely than me, and crush me head-on.

Like I said before, NO NAME's playstyle is to use overwhelming effort to charge her enemy head-on. She didn't insist she was right and fight according to her own rules. She climbed into the ring, played by its established rules, and won. That was her in a nutshell.

But listen, Hinami. Sure, I may have started by aping other players. I put in effort and grabbed my wins.

But I didn't stop there.

When I heard Hinami say you had to play by the existing rules, I thought my playstyle wouldn't work in real life. At the same time, doubt bubbled up inside me.

That's why I want to test it out this time around.

NO NAME's only been playing *Atafami* for a couple months, so she might not know yet.

She might not know who had changed how players of *Atafami* saw the game just six months ago.

I want to see if nanashi's playstyle works in real life, too.

"Tomozaki-kun..."

"...Ah!"

My consciousness was pulled back up from the depths of my inner world by a strand of light. Kikuchi-san was staring at me.

"Huh? Wh-what's wrong? Is there something wrong with my face?"

If she said yes, I had a response ready to go: *Don't worry—it always looks weird.*

“No...it’s just that your expression is...”

My expression? Had my mouth dropped open while I was lost in thought?

“Is...?”

“I—I was just surprised because...you looked sort of...gallant.”

“Galla—?!”

My face burned; that was not a word I was expecting to hear. Kikuchi- san touched her mouth with her finger and looked away. Yikes, I almost fell in love right then.

* * *

After school, Mimimi and I headed to the cafeteria and sat by the window eating ice cream as we began our second campaign meeting.

“First, let me ask you something,” I said.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Have you decided on what to say in your speech to the school the day after tomorrow?”

“Nope. I’ve thought about a couple options, but nothing feels quite right.”

Her tone was jokey, but her words reassured me—when they really shouldn’t have—that I could do what I wanted.

“In that case...,” I said, mentally running through the rest of my sentence before I said it, “h-how about you let me write the speech?”

“What?!” she shrieked. Well, of course she did. I know I was asking a lot.

“Um, how do I put this? Look, you’re great at talking to people and negotiating, so...I think you ought to spend your time out there interacting with the public.”

“Not sure I’m that good at it...but I see your point!”

Mimimi responded modestly but positively. After all, I had come up with this argument by keeping her best interests in mind.

“And I’m good at strategies and stuff, so...you should leave that to me while you handle the negotiating. While you’re doing that, I’ll write the speech, and when I’m done, you check it and deliver it.”

Mimimi looked down pensively. “...You think it’ll work?”

What she probably meant was *Will we win?* I looked straight at her. There was a lot that worried me: uncertainty, lack of self-confidence, whether Mimimi would trust me. But I also had a sliver of hope.

“I...have an idea.”

Mimimi looked at me for a minute, then nodded lightly. “Okay! Do what you’re good at, as they say. You support me; I support you. I’m not opposed to that, Brain!” she said cheerfully, pounding my

shoulder forcefully.

“Ow!” I rubbed my shoulder as I kept talking. “There’s a couple things I want you to do today.”

After I explained the strategy to her, she gave her approval and walked off toward school. Her mission today: win over the first-year students. Meanwhile, I ironed out the details of the speech I’d started planning in the library, and then I headed for the gym. I wanted to see if one of my potential strats was actually viable.

“H-hello in there,” I called in a voice too soft for anyone to hear. Like the day before, the basketball and volleyball teams were practicing in the gym. I scanned the courts for Tama-chan, and when I spotted her, I skirted the edge of the building to get closer.

“T-Tama-chan,” I called timidly.

“Tomozaki? What’s the matter?”

“There’s something I want you to help me with... It has to do with Mimimi’s campaign.”

“Okay...what kind of help?”

You might not expect it from someone so small, but this girl doesn’t mince words. She’s friends with Mimimi, so I bet she already knows I’m helping with the campaign.

“Can you leave practice for a minute?”

“...” Tama-chan silently looked around her. “Wait a second!” she said.

She trotted across the court to Shiori, exchanged a couple of words with her, and ran back to me.

“She said it’s fine. So what do you need?”

She craned her neck and focused that overly direct stare on me. As always, I felt like she was taking me in as I was, rather than judging me as someone she liked or disliked.

“I’d rather not go into all the details, but”—I pulled out my smartphone—“I’m going to walk way over there and play some music, and I want you to tell me if you can hear it.”

She looked down at my phone, then straight into my eyes again.

“Should I give you a signal?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Got it! Where do I stand?”

We were moving fast. Seems she didn’t have any questions.

“Um, you can just stay here, but...” I started mumbling more as the awkwardness grew.

“But what?”

“Oh, no, I was just surprised you didn’t ask why I wanted you to do that.”

Tama-chan tilted her head as if to say *Huh?*

“Didn’t you say you didn’t want to go into detail?” she said, very dryly.

“Oh, right, I did say that.”

This awkward feeling was really messing me up. Tama-chan did not smile. “Also, it’s to help Minmi win the election, right?” She didn’t seem to be hinting at anything else.

“Yeah.”

“Well then, I’ll help you! Minmi said it was okay, right?”

“Y-yeah, she did.”

“Okay, then! I’ll stand here and listen.”

“Oh, um, thanks!”

And that was that. What can I say? She’s a very direct person. I think I remember Hinami telling me her type was unusual these days.

I hurried to start the tests I’d come to do. First, I stood in the very back of the gym and turned on the music. Tama-chan made a big circle with her arms to indicate she’d heard. Nice. Next, I went up to the little balconies on either side of the gym’s upper level, right under the roof. Tama-chan made another circle. Then I went behind the curtain on the stage and tested out a couple of spots, such as the pullout storage unit where the chairs were kept. Finally, I walked back over to Tama-chan.

“Thanks!”

“Done?”

“Yeah. Oh—where could the music be heard best?”

Tama-chan pointed to the two verandas. “Up there.”

“Okay...thanks.”

Good. I’d taken one more step toward realizing my plan.

Now that my task was done, and I didn’t have anything else to talk about, I said good-bye to Tama-chan and turned toward the door, planning to return to the cafeteria to work on the speech some more. Unexpectedly, she stopped me.

“Tomozaki!”

“Huh?” I turned to look at her.

“About the election.”

“Yeah?”

She looked at me, clearly worried about something. “Don’t make her work too hard.”

“Huh?” At first, I didn’t understand.

“Minmi...” Tama-chan’s face fell. “She tends to push herself. More than she should.”

“Oh, right.” I nodded, puzzled.

“Of course, I don’t think she’d let *you* see that.”

Belatedly, I realized she was completely in earnest. She was honestly worried about Mimimi, and she was trying to tell me, in her

very direct way, what her concerns were. There was no ulterior motive at play. She said what she meant.

“She tends to say she’s not overdoing it and then overdo it.”

“...Yeah, I can see that.”

Even though I hadn’t spent much time with Mimimi, the image Tama-chan painted fit the girl I knew.

“So watch out for her, okay?”

Hinami had told me once that Tama-chan was able to bare her heart in her words. Right now, the truth of that was coming through loud and clear. And that meant I couldn’t ignore what she was saying. I thumped my chest, which as far as I know is the skinniest chest in our school, and worked up a smile.

“Leave it to me!”

Tama-chan pointed happily at my face. “You bet I will!”

She turned toward the court, glancing back contentedly at me. Suddenly, I remembered something. I hadn’t asked Tama-chan what Mimimi did to her yesterday, but she might tell me now. Why not just go for it?

“Oh, by the way, the other day, Mimimi said something about ‘magic fingers’—what did she do to you?”

Beet-red, Tama-chan turned toward me, pointed aggressively my way, and snapped, “You don’t ask that kind of question to girls!!”

Shot down. Why to girls, specifically? The mystery deepens...

* * *

Having finished my task and returned to the cafeteria, I was working on the speech when Mimimi arrived.

“Hey. How did it go?”

She made an “okay” sign and looked me in the eye. “Perfect!”

The wave of energy threatened to overwhelm me, but I tried to keep up, forming a smile and giving her a thumbs-up. “Nice!”

Mimimi laughed loudly. *S-success? I must be getting the hang of these comebacks!* “Dang...that did not sound like you at all...!” She cackled again.

Oh, so that was it. She laughed because the gloomy guy suddenly did something upbeat. Figures.

“And like... Your thumb...!” She laughed, mimicking my awkward movements. Come on, don’t kick a guy when he’s down! *Wait, really? Is that what I did? Okay, that is kinda funny. Additional work needed.*

“A-anyway!” I said, my face hot. “How many classes did you go to?”

“Um, two still hadn’t finished homeroom, so I went to those two... heh-heh-heh.”

The last ripples of her laughter broke through her answer.

Seriously, stop. “Okay...so you’ll do the rest tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Aside from that, it’s a question of how much they trust me.”

I nodded.

“But really, Tomozaki, you’re evil. Should I really be tricking the baby first-years?”

“What are you talking about? You’re not tricking them. When you win, you’re really going to give it your all, so what’s the problem?”

“Ah-ha-ha, guess so!”

“You’re not promising you’ll be able to carry out your platform. And maybe you really will be able to do it!”

“That’s true! If I win, I’ll go out and get those air conditioners!”

Yes, that was my proposal to Mimimi: win over the first-year students with air-conditioning. It was very simple. She just had to go to their homerooms right after school or right before school started, when most of the students would be there, and tell them that as soon as she got elected, she would work to have an air conditioner installed in every class. The key point was to go only to first-year classes.

That was because we second-year students, not to mention the third-year students, already knew how hard it would be to achieve that goal. If she made the same speech to those classes, it wouldn’t just fall flat; it would make them think she was unrealistic and maybe even lose her some votes.

The first-year kids, on the other hand, had just entered high school. It was July, not even three months after the entrance ceremony, and they might plausibly think that if the student council president worked hard enough, getting air conditioners might be more than an empty dream. All the more so once they heard Mimimi’s impassioned speech.

The question of air-conditioning was of supreme importance to high school students. The majority of schools these days already have it, but not Sekitomo High School. Which was why any student with genuine hope in the possibility would become a core Mimimi supporter.

Of course, it wouldn’t do to lie, so Mimimi would have to push hard for AC once she was elected. If she didn’t succeed by the time they moved up to second year, they would probably just figure it was a harder goal to achieve than they originally thought. Best case anyway.

“Oh, about the speech.”

“I’ve been wondering about that! How’s it coming?”

I spread out the sheets of paper and started to tell Mimimi about it. Of course, I was just parroting Hinami...

First, in order to gain everyone's support during the speech, Mimimi would need to manipulate the mood. But it wouldn't be easy with a group as large as an entire high school. In a situation like that, one weapon was likely to be especially useful. I thought back to the most impressive example I knew of mood manipulation: the time in home ec when Hinami rescued Tama-chan.

"First, you've gotta make them laugh."

"I see, I see... Wait, what?" Mimimi said, overacting her surprise like a stand-up comedian. "Wait a second, mister! Making them laugh sounds easy, but it's not!"

Yeah, makes sense. I nodded. It would have been easier if Mimimi had said, "Leave it to me!" but since she didn't, I told her my plan.

"I know. It would be really hard to do some big clever routine like a comedian, right?"

"Impossible, more like!"

"But—"

"But?"

As I spoke my next words, I visualized what Hinami had done in home ec and how Mimimi had been talking these past few days—how she made fun of me with her spot-on impressions.

"If it's an inside joke, you can do it." In my opinion.

"...An inside joke?"

Mimimi tilted her head quizzically. She was right. Getting a laugh the usual way would be hard. But if the punch line was something relevant just to the people listening, it became possible. That's what Hinami had done in home ec.

"Specifically, imitating Ms. Kawamura."

Mimimi looked down for a minute, probably imagining it, then smiled.

"Ah-ha-ha, I get it... Yeah, I think I can do that. And I think it'll fly!"

Good. I had Mimimi's approval. That was a relief.

Our homeroom teacher, Ms. Kawamura, was the head second-year teacher, so she often got up to talk at school assemblies. As a result, all the students were familiar with her distinctive way of speaking. Mimimi would be imitating her.

"Oh good. Then let's put that in the beginning. As for the main part of the speech—"

"Oh boy! I've been waiting for this!"

I thought back on each of the techniques Hinami had taught me for a successful proposal, then turned them on her as a weapon.

"The main elements of the speech will be campaign promises that appeal to everyone."

Bringing everyone's interests into agreement came first; we'd get

as many students as possible to feel that they were going to gain something if Mimimi got elected.

“Okay, like we did with the flyer, right?”

Mimimi was right—almost. But we also had to convince the most vocal people in the audience.

“Not quite. We need to be careful about something.”

“Careful ho—? ...Oh, I get it,” Mimimi realized. “Teachers.”

Exactly. We’d handed out the flyer only to students. This was different. We also had to satisfy the teachers, who held the most decision-making power in the school. If they rejected Mimimi, all the votes we’d gathered would be pointless. I nodded.

“We’ve gotta make the teachers think *Hexactly!*”

“Ooh, Aoi-ese! But I don’t think you’re using it quite right!”

The second I made my “cool” face, Mimimi slapped me down.

“R-really? Uh, anyway, I made sure not to write anything that would get you kicked offstage by a teacher, but all the students will still feel they’re going to gain something.”

Actually, that makes my speech sound crazier than it was. It was really just an extension of her campaign promises.

I showed Mimimi the speech and went over the content, while she listened very intently.

“Huh. Sounds safe!”

She seemed satisfied. And she was right—nothing was too risky so far.

“It would be great if you argue for the air conditioners, but that’s not an option. Which leaves us with this as a compromise.”

“Yeah, that would be hard to do!” Mimimi said, smiling.

“There’s one more thing, and it’s the most important of all...” I explained the little trick I’d come up with for the end. “...And that’s how you’ll wrap up the speech.”

Once I was done talking, I waited nervously for Mimimi’s response. When I glanced over at her, she was grinning excitedly at me.

“...Tomozaki, you’re a real con man!”

She raised her arm high above her head and swung it down toward my shoulder. This again. She’d gotten me so many times by now that the instant I saw her move, I jumped aside, barely escaping the blow. Whoosh.

“...Huh?”

“Nice try!”

I pointed at her face like Tama-chan always does. Mimimi burst out laughing and sputtered, “What even was that...? Who are you...?” Among other things. *Stop already! I promise I’ll never do it again!*

Still, I had her go-ahead. The only thing left was to nail down the

details tomorrow and get ready for the big day.

* * *

The next morning—the day before the speech—I left for school earlier than usual. Today Mimimi would be going around to the first-year classes before homeroom to give her air-conditioner spiel. When I arrived at school, Hinami was campaigning outside as usual with a big group of students gathered around. I glanced over at her as I passed, reassured, and then headed into the hallway where all the first-year classrooms were to check on Mimimi.

After passing a couple classrooms, I arrived at the one where Mimimi was talking about how she'd work to get air conditioners.

"I've had enough of campaigns to make everyone say hello to one another! I want to get us air conditioners so everyone can focus better on studying instead of getting heatstroke. Of course, my biggest motivation is just that I hate being so hot all the time!"

With lines like that, she was getting some laughs along with support for the polls. She really was something. I could never do this as well as she could. If I came up with the same strategy for myself and tried to implement it, I'm sure my status as a bottom-tier character would have me tripping over myself constantly.

So this was good.

The strategy I'd come up with was being implemented exactly as I had envisioned. I felt like I was using a controller to make Found play out the moves I'd imagined. If life was a game like Hinami said, then this fight was a really fun one.

And that was why I was determined to take this election very seriously. I'd win no matter what—for Mimimi, who'd entrusted the heart of the fight to me. I think that's what Hinami meant when she was telling me about responsibility.

"Oh."

At lunch, I remembered something: I was supposed to meet with Hinami on Thursday after school. What should I do? I wanted to talk to Mimimi about the final details of the speech. The election would be over tomorrow. Why not just meet with Hinami then? I decided to send her a LINE message right away.

"Can we reschedule the meeting for tomorrow?"

A few seconds later, she responded.

"That's fine, but why?"

I wavered for a minute before deciding to answer honestly.

"I ended up helping Mimimi with her campaign, and we need to figure

out the final details, so I want to focus on that."

The notification that she'd read the message popped up, and then there was a pause. Eventually a response arrived reading simply, "Okay." That was curt. But so is Hinami. Whatever. Now I'd be able to fully devote myself to the campaign until it was over.

"Ahhh! I can't believe tomorrow is the speech!"

School was over, and Mimimi and I were meeting in the cafeteria as usual to review our work so far and talk about the plan for tomorrow. Once again, we were sitting by the window eating ice cream.

"Yeah. Oh, that reminds me, did you go to all the first-year classrooms?"

"Yup! They ate it up!"

"Nice..."

That was the best news I could have gotten. A great reaction. If 80 percent of first-year students voted for Mimimi, that would be around a hundred fifty votes. If 80 percent of the basketball and handball teams also voted for her thanks to the electric pump scheme, that would bring it to two hundred fifty votes or so altogether. Sekitomo High School has a little under six hundred students. That meant to get a majority, we'd have to win over another fifty or so of the remaining three hundred fifty voters with the content of the speech. Even with Hinami as our opponent, it was a fairly strong plan.

On the other hand, if the air-conditioner and electric ball pump plans both netted us 50 percent of the target students, that would give us a little over a hundred fifty votes. Of the remaining four hundred fifty students, we'd need to win over a hundred fifty. With Hinami on the field, that wasn't guaranteed, but we had a fighting chance.

"All that's left is tomorrow's speech."

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "Which reminds me, did you have any ideas for improving it?"

"Mm-hmm, a couple," Mimimi said before laying out her ideas for where to add more jokes and stuff like that. All her revisions were aimed at making the speech more fun.

"Leave it to a normie," I couldn't help moaning. As we were practicing and revising various points—

"Hey, if it isn't Tomozaki and Mimimi! What are you two up to?" Mizusawa was walking toward us with Nakamura and Takei.

Nakamura. Even after the incident in the old principal's office, he'd been lashing out at me. Okay, maybe he wasn't as actively aggressive as before, but I still avoided him. Every time I talked to Izumi, I felt like someone was staring at me—but hopefully that was just my imagination.

Wait a second... Why wasn't Mizusawa with Hinami today? No, not like that—I'm talking about election activities here. I was suspicious, but for the moment, I kept my seat and responded to Mizusawa.

"Oh, I'm just helping Mimimi out with her campaign."

Nakamura jumped in. "What? You are?" he said, looking at me and then at Mimimi. "Why Tomozaki?"

"Believe it or not, Nakamu, Tomozaki's my brain!"

"Huh? What does that mean?"

Nakamura furrowed his brows, looking stern. Ignoring his reaction, Mimimi continued cheerfully.

"Like, for gathering votes and working on my speech!"

"Hmph. Seems like a loser to me," Nakamura said after a pause of several seconds, like he was sharing his intuitive feelings. It was like every neuron in his mind was colored by the psychology of the ever-victorious normie.

"...Well, this is what it takes to beat Aoi!"

I noticed Mimimi hesitated briefly before she said it.

"Hmph. Win, huh?" Nakamura scoffed, as if he'd just heard a particularly weak joke. It pissed me off.

"O-of course she wants to win. That's why she's running."

It wasn't exactly eloquent, but at least it was a comeback to Nakamura.

"Oh really?" he sneered.

"Y-yes, really."

Obviously, I was petrified.

"If you ask me, you're wasting your time," he said to both of us.

"Did you see that boomerang?"

It was Mizusawa who interrupted Nakamura's provocative words with a muttered response. But what the hell? What did a boomerang have to do with this?

"Huh?" Nakamura said.

Mizusawa launched into a good-natured explanation complete with hand gestures.

"Whoosh, whoosh, bang! It means your own words have come back to bite you, Shuji."

"Dude, what are you talking about?"

I had already guessed what Mizusawa was trying to say. He was trying to—

"Never mind. Personally, I don't think it's pointless to give your all to beat someone way better than you. Know what I mean?" Mizusawa's grin was like a mask, but his cheerful tone kept the question from sounding like a challenge.

Nakamura shifted his eyes away uncomfortably for a second

before answering.

“...Oh. Well, whatever.”

Then he clamped his mouth shut. After all, it was hard not to notice the ironic implication in Mizusawa's question: *“Is it also pointless for you to practice Atafami so you can beat Tomozaki?”*

“But I mean, come on. Tomozaki? What about Kawasaki or someone like that?”

Had Nakamura gotten what Mizusawa really meant, or had it just felt like a little jab at his wound? In any case, he changed the subject, and then all three of them started imitating how I talk and teasing me in a less-than-friendly way. *Et tu, Mizusawa? Well, whatever.*

My eyes met Mizusawa's. He sized up Nakamura for a second, then slipped away from the conversation and came over to sit down next to me.

“So are we gonna see something good tomorrow?”

He was grinning. He had to be talking about the election.

“Who knows? We're doing okay, though.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Well, I'll be looking forward to it.”

“Hey, why aren't you with Hinami today?”

As I asked him that question, I felt a gloomy fog rise in my chest. No, I'm imagining things.

“I got dumped. She said she wanted to think about her speech and do some other stuff on her own today.”

“D-du...”

I'm ashamed to say I overreacted even though I knew he was using the word metaphorically.

“Anyway, tomorrow's the day.”

Mizusawa started to get up, but I stopped him. I wanted to say something about the exchange with Nakamura earlier.

“What?”

“Oh, uh, sorry you had to back me up earlier...”

“Huh? ...Oh, with Shuji?”

“Yeah.”

Mizusawa grew serious. “Listen. Situations like that? You don't say sorry, Fumiya. You say thanks.”

“Uh...”

And with that snappy, somehow familiar little maxim, Mizusawa stood up, rejoined Nakamura and Takei without a backward glance, and walked out of the cafeteria. What just happened? I have no idea if he was serious or joking. Also, since when does he call me Fumiya?

“Those guys are as lively as ever, huh?”

Somehow, Mimimi was able to gloss over everything that had just happened as “lively.” She really did have the normie mind-set. To me, it felt more like a fistfight with words. But now that the verbal brawl

was over, Mimimi and I calmly discussed the speech, practiced it, and ended our meeting.

Mimimi said she had to wait for Tama-chan, so I headed home alone. On my way, I discovered an emotion in my heart that I never, ever expected to find there.

No, this can't be! This time I actually feel...a little lonely?

When a mentor character becomes a boss, they'll push you to the edge

It was the day of the election. School-wide assemblies take place about once a month, always on Fridays five minutes after homeroom begins. Today, that's when the campaign speeches were going to happen. I usually show up right before assemblies start, but today I had some preparations to take care of, and anyway, I couldn't calm down, so I headed to the gym early.

When I left homeroom, I spotted Hinami walking just ahead of me. Even from behind, I could tell it was her from that charismatic strut. Until last week, we'd been talking every day, but for the past few days, we hadn't talked at all.

I caught up with her and called out in an almost challenging way—I'd never use this tone with anyone else.

"Hey."

Without turning her head, Hinami shifted her gaze coolly in my direction.

"Oh, Tomozaki-kun. You seem well today."

Her tone was as ironic as always.

"I am, I'm happy to say."

"Glad to hear it. I see you every day in class, but...it's been a while." Hinami grinned broadly.

"Yeah, Hinami. It has." I couldn't help smiling.

"Still got that creepy smile, I see."

"Yup, thanks to the muscle training you taught me."



“I don’t think I taught you to smile like that. Here, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Hinami displayed a perfect feminine smile, one so flawless, it made my heart skip a beat even though I knew it was fake.

“As usual, you win.”

This time, Hinami’s smile was victorious. It wasn’t flawless, but in my opinion, it suited her better. “Sounds like you’ve been busy.”

“Well, of course, considering our opponent.”

“I see. It’s been rough going, I imagine.”

“It is what it is. But I don’t want to hear that from you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“No, thank *you*.”

We had to catch up on a couple days’ worth of banter.

“I’ve been bored this week, not playing against nanashi.” She sighed. We’d taken a break from *Atafami* for a few days.

“Really? That’s a strange thing to say.”

“...How so?”

I glanced sidelong at her. “I mean, nanashi was under the impression he’d been playing NO NAME all along this week.”

“Well, well,” Hinami said, smiling happily in contrast to her flat tone. “Does that mean I have something to look forward to today?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

We were almost at the gym. I quickened my pace and pulled ahead of Hinami. Then I stepped onto the stage where today’s battle would play out—the gym. I glanced back at Hinami.

“All I can say is, nanashi did his best.”

I turned back toward the gym and walked to the wings of the stage.

* * *

“That wraps up my advisory to the Aoi Hinami Fan Club—I mean, my speech in support of Aoi Hinami.”

The gym erupted in laughter at the boy’s voice coming over the speakers.

“—Thank you, Takahiro Mizusawa-kun.”

At length, the laughter changed to applause. Mizusawa’s speech had been an extension of the smooth, funny talks he’d been giving outside the school. Yeah, he was a tough one to beat. I had listened from the wings of the stage, where I was permitted to stand as a member of Mimimi’s campaign team. After he was done, he walked toward me.

Mimimi was standing next to me. She seemed restless, licking her lips and touching her nose as she stared at her speech. Hinami was waiting in the wings on the other side.

Maybe because he noticed how nervous Mimimi was, Mizusawa didn't try to talk to her as he walked past. And then the moment arrived.

"And next, please welcome student council candidate Aoi Hinami-san to the stage to deliver her speech."

Hinami walked jauntily up to the podium in the center. Just the sight of her beautiful figure and slight smile as she stood in front of the podium was enough to charm the audience.

She gracefully raised one arm to face level, turned her palm toward the spectators, then brought it to her chest. My eyes followed her every movement seemingly of their own will.

"Good morning. I'm Aoi Hinami."

Her lovely, strong voice rippled like a drop of water through the moment of silent attention her hand movements had created.

Hinami's speech had begun.

"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today."

She gave a slow, shallow bow to the audience. More than the content of her speech, it was the pace of the words and the pauses woven in between that seized the attention of her onlookers.

"Today is the student council election..."

She smiled brightly. Her fake smile was way too cute.

"I bet I can guess what many of you are thinking right now."

She turned both of her palms up.

"Eh, doesn't matter who wins."

She did a voice to go with it, one that sounded like a dubbed voice-over for a romantic comedy from overseas, and a ripple of laughter passed through the audience. The next instant, though, Hinami's face had grown solemn as she raised one finger into the air.

"But I have something to say to all of you who think so."

The students who had been laughing a moment earlier fell silent like children who had been scolded for poor manners. Hinami paused very briefly, then brought her finger around to the front and aimed it at the audience. She raised one eyebrow, smiled an ever-so-slightly silly smile, and continued.

"You're right."

The audience roared with laughter. Huh. She wasn't doing anything special. Just going for simple jokes. But she pulled off those jokes beautifully—keeping her face animated, startling you for a moment, and then swooping in for the punch line while you were still

off your guard. The audience was under the spell of her every word and movement, taken in completely by NO NAME. I was no exception.

Hinami smiled shyly, a little vulnerably. The audience and I couldn't tear our eyes away.

"Jokes aside, though...it's not easy to make big changes in the span of one year as student council president."

From there on out, the mood was under her control.

"But as far as I am able, I promise to do what I can to make life at this school better. Instead of pursuing unrealistic dreams, I'll start with what's achievable and go from there. I see that as my role... Fellow students, are there things about this school that bother you?"

For a moment, the gym was dead silent.

"There are many things that bother me."

Suddenly her tone was vulnerable and innocent. Laughter rose from the audience.

"I'm sure none of you is completely satisfied with the current state of our school. For example—"

The corners of Hinami's mouth turned up very slightly, just enough for me to see from my position in the wings—at least, I thought they did. A vague dread spread through me.

"The selection of items at the school store isn't good, and the sports festival is too small. The field is too bumpy, and maybe you want an electric pump. Maybe you'd like to be able to ask for a larger serving at the cafeteria."

For a second, my mind went blank.

Among the examples she listed were some from our platform, and most importantly, the electric pump I'd come up with as a way to gain core voters. Next to me, Mimimi looked up in shock.

Hinami continued.

"I'd like to address those demands one by one."

That's when I realized.

We'd been crushed.

Head-on. Our strategy had been demolished. Maybe not everything, but at least the votes we'd bought with the electric pump promise. Plus part of the support we'd gained through the platform. Crushed with a single phrase. *She'd address those demands one by one.* The audience, too, simmered with gasps at those strong words.

"But—"

And she wasn't done. The audience and I waited for her next words.

"If I went around making lots of promises like those, some people might wonder if I could really achieve them all. That's why I've decided to make just one big campaign promise."

One by one she bent down the fingers she'd raised until only the

pointer finger on her right hand was still in the air.

“That promise is—”

She paused.

In that pause, dread once again washed over me. I thought about her powers of deduction, analysis, and implementation.

I thought about the electric pump among the examples she’d listed a moment earlier.

Most of all, I thought about her playstyle—using overwhelming effort to challenge her opponents head-on.

She didn’t insist she was right and fight according to her own rules. She climbed into the ring, played by its established rules, and she won.

Taking all of that into consideration, NO NAME could only arrive at one possible answer.

Hinami slowly parted her lips.

“—That promise is to install an air conditioner in every single classroom.”

Turns out I had everything to fear.

“Fweeeee!”

Somewhere in the audience, someone—probably someone popular and influential—whistled with their fingers.

Cue wild applause... Okay, that only happens on TV, but a healthy murmur made up of students whispering to one another about Hinami’s declaration swept through the audience. Even if it wasn’t loud, the mood was weirdly feverish.

Still...promising to put an air conditioner in every class wasn’t convincing. I’d implemented a similar strategy, but I’d decided it was so unrealistic, it could lose us votes, so we’d only made that promise to the first-year students. Mimimi had talked about how it would be great to include that as a talking point in the speech, but we’d decided it wasn’t possible because no one would ever believe us.

But Hinami had just calmly made the same promise to the entire school, right in front of the teachers, and as her only campaign promise to boot.

I just couldn’t see any way this was a good idea.

But I couldn’t help questioning myself.

Maybe she really could pull it off. If Aoi Hinami said she could... If Aoi Hinami made that her only campaign promise...

That’s when I realized:

This was a head-on charge.

She'd built up a lot of trust in the past. She'd proven herself. People probably thought, *If Aoi can't do it, no one can.* And, *She might even be able to get us AC.* She was bulldozing us with all that trust she had accumulated through raw effort.

To top it off, she was making AC her only promise.

For Mimimi and me, promising AC was unrealistic. It was a weapon we couldn't fully manipulate. For Hinami, on the other hand, it was child's play. She was showing us she could turn it into a realistic, powerful campaign promise.

In other words, she'd invested more than we had.

"I bet you remember how awful last summer was. This year is shaping up to be just as bad."

She was riding the crowd's enthusiasm with rapid-fire statements.

"Installing air conditioners may be a tall order. After all, Sekitomo High School hasn't managed to do it in all the years since its founding. Maybe the prefectural government has something against us."

Another light wave of laughter from the audience.

"I can think of a lot of reasons why. Because of our location, our school doesn't get quite as hot as other schools. Our academic record as a prep school is good, but our clubs don't do as well. Et cetera, et cetera."

She listed the possible reasons, sounding troubled.

"But, my fellow students. Did you know that one of those reasons has recently dropped off the list?"

She smiled broadly. A little too broadly, so the audience would understand.

"The track club has been doing very well lately."

For a moment, the audience was silent, but then a few good-natured retorts came from who I assume were members of the track team.

"Tooting your own horn, huh?"

"Yeah, nationals, baby!"

That tipped off the rest of the audience to her meaning, and whispers swept through the room like a tornado.

I couldn't help feeling excited, too. She was using the achievements of the track team, *achievements that she herself was responsible for*, as a weapon to pull in the audience.

"I think this ought to satisfy a lot of people at the top. What do you think?"

Spontaneous applause. Damn she was good. Totally fearless, yet also totally rational.

She'd now won over most of the audience. But that wasn't enough.

There was still the second iron rule of mood manipulation that she'd taught me.

Her speech had already convinced most students that they would gain something if she was elected. They all shared her vested interest. Even if some people weren't convinced, she'd probably stolen practically every first-year vote we'd gained. What she hadn't done yet was persuade the most vocal people.

She'd be in good shape if her track-club strategy had won them over. But what if it hadn't? The teachers could wipe out all her support with one comment. "Air conditioners?" they might say. "Only children would believe they could do that." If they were concerned about candidates collecting votes with empty promises, they might even make a public announcement after the speech such as, "Our school will not install air-conditioning."

The instant that happened, Hinami's strategies would be reduced to ash. Her very reputation would take a serious hit.

So what would she do? Did she have another more realistic goal in mind? Or...

Before I could arrive at an answer, she continued speaking.

"Nevertheless, in practical terms, installing air conditioners in every classroom will be quite difficult to achieve."

Although her language was proper and formal, her clear voice and intonation prevented her from sounding stiff.

"At this very moment, I see some of the teachers looking skeptical."

With a graceful gesture, she waved toward the staff seating area. The rest of the audience and I followed with our eyes. The teachers were smirking uncomfortably. Contrasted with Hinami's confident smile, they looked weak and unreliable, which made Hinami appear even more trustworthy.

"When my speech ends and the assembly is over, I can guess what they'll be saying to each other."

She grinned.

"AC in every class? How stupid can you get?"

Huh. So that's what her strategy was. To bring up possible arguments before her enemy had a chance to, then deflate them. Slick talkers did it all the time. Minimizing the potential damage from teachers—a move worthy of Hinami.

Just as that thought passed through my mind, she continued.

"And you know what?"

"They'll be saying it in the verrrrry well air-conditioned teacher's lounge."

Ouch.

After a moment of silence, the audience burst into laughter. Even in my shock, I felt laughter bubbling up in my own chest.

What the hell?

The laughter of the audience thundered in my ears so loudly, I could feel Hinami's superior ability in my bones.

When I came up with Mimimi's platform, and when I came up with the AC strategy, too, I was constantly thinking about what the teachers would think and weighing that against the student view. That's why I'd come up with excuses related to school spirit and student convenience for everything in the platform. The content of the speech was a compromise, too, taking into account the powers we were up against. That wasn't a bad thing. Normally, it was necessary.

But Hinami wasn't normal.

Aoi Hinami forged her own path.

She'd used all her effort and her accomplishments and the trust she'd built to bulldoze the teachers head-on, just as she'd done to the rest of us. It was the same old NO NAME playstyle: use overwhelming effort to charge her opponents head-on. She was crushing them just as she'd crushed my pandering platform, electric pumps, and AC strategy. Even when she was going up against teachers, she climbed into the ring and obliterated them. It didn't matter who her opponent was. Her fighting style never changed. She was terrifyingly consistent.

"To conclude, I promise to work hard on a range of issues! If you agree with what I've said today, cast your vote for Aoi Hinami! It's hexactly the right thing to do!"

With that, she strutted off the stage to thunderous applause. I couldn't stop myself from clapping along with the audience. Maybe I meant it as a show of respect.

Hinami walked to our side of the stage and right past me without even looking my way. At first, I thought she was ignoring me.

"Still think you can win?"

But as she passed, she whispered a few words in that oh-so-familiar proud and confident voice, just loudly enough for me and no one else to hear.

* * *

"Thanks, guys!"

An energetic, feminine voice rang from the speakers placed around the gym. The audience broke out in applause.

"Thank you, Yumiko Yamashita-san."

I could tell Yamashita-san had been a little nervous, but her sports-announcer-style energy came together with the lively content of

her speech to convey her likable personality to the audience. The mood was better than I'd expected; she'd done an amazing job considering she had to follow that display of brute force from Hinami. Yeah, it's a good thing I wasn't in her role.

Next came the crucial moment.

"I'd like to introduce our next candidate for student council president, Minami Nanami-san."

That was when I swung into action.

Using the stairs in the wings, I headed for the little pseudo-balconies near the roof on either side of the gym. I had an excuse ready if I was stopped, but since I made sure to act like I belonged there, no one interfered and I reached the upper level without incident.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

I could hear the audience laughing. I couldn't hear Mimimi's speech, but she was probably at the part where she imitated our teacher. Obviously, it didn't come out of the blue; it was woven into the rest of her speech: "Ms. Kawamura said such-and-such, so I decided to run." That was Mimimi's idea. In hindsight, my original version probably would have flopped; it was too abrupt.

I took out my smartphone, turned the volume up as high as it could go, and made sure everything was ready. Then I turned the speakers toward the audience so they would hear it as clearly as possible.

Okay. All I had to do now was wait in hiding up here and be ready for any unexpected developments. I strained to hear Mimimi's speech. She didn't sound bad—geez, I sounded like a snob just then. She sounded good. The audience was laughing now and then, and I could see some students nodding. Still, if I was honest with myself, she wasn't doing as well as Hinami—but that was more a testament to how well Hinami had done.

On top of that, the structure of the speeches was similar. That was my fault. Well, the content was completely different, but they were still both based on the two core principles of mood manipulation. I mean, I had structured it around the rules Hinami had taught me. In a sense, my speech was just an inferior version of Hinami's.

"...Shit."

I felt like someone had caught me off guard in *Atafami* and escaped my combo. I bit my lip.

...I'd been so full of myself.

Hinami had taught me some of the rules of life, and I thought they'd be enough to allow me to fight on the stage of the speech. Plus, I'd had access to an A-tier character. I'd thought I—that is, nanashi—

was good enough to give Hinami a run for her money with a few tricks and a character with a good moveset.

“...I’m ashamed I thought it would be that easy.”

She’d put in the effort, and she had the experience. And she had the drive.

Hinami’s speech was packed with everything she needed to win no matter what, and to win by an overwhelming majority, without losing a single vote. No matter how you looked at it, she’d given it her all and she hadn’t messed around. I’d learned a couple rules, and I thought I could use them like a pro. Well, she wasn’t the kind of opponent you could beat with unearned arrogance. I was embarrassed to have miscalculated so drastically.

“But...”

I still had to show her nanashi had guts. Mimimi was counting on me. I couldn’t give up now.

I waited quietly.

“Of course, it’s all for the sake of boosting Sekitomo High School’s school spirit...”

She’d finished explaining the platform, and now she was wrapping up. That was the moment.

Fweeep! Fweeep! Fweeep! Fweeep!

The scream of a siren echoed through the gym. Mimimi made a show of stopping and looking around, while the audience was in an uproar. Some students were trying to figure out where the noise was coming from; others were pulling out their phones to make sure it wasn’t their own alarm; still others were telling whoever was sitting next to them to check theirs or to be quiet so they could hear what was going on. But no one could tell where the sound was coming from in such a big gym. It was chaos.

“Hey, you guys, be quiet!”

“Someone turn that thing off!”

“I bet they’re hiding it so they don’t get in trouble!”

“Where’s it coming from?”

“Sounds like an iPhone alert, like for an earthquake or something.”

“Yeah, you’re right!”

“I’m in the clear; I’ve got an Android.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Mimimi chose just the right moment to look heroically out over the audience. She coughed once. The mic picked up the sound and amplified it through the speakers. All eyes turned to Mimimi.

“Hey, Siri! Turn off that alarm!”

Mimimi’s voice reached everyone there. Surprised, the audience fell silent.

Bebeep!

“I have turned off the alarm.”

Up in the rafters, I crouched next to my phone as Siri’s voice echoed softly out of the speakers and down to the audience.

Bam!

The audience erupted with as much excitement as it had with Hinami. Yes!

But Mimimi didn’t stop. Another cough blasted over the speakers. The audience fell silent.

“Hey, Siri! Who’s the next student council president gonna be?”

Bebeep!

“I’m Siri, your virtual assistant.”

“No, not your self-introduction!”

Boom. The audience erupted with laughter again. They probably were now thinking of Mimimi as a candidate who could ad-lib when an alarm accidentally went off.

That was my strategy.

There was no way we could beat Hinami with a perfectly polished speech. In which case, we had to fight outside the ring—for instance, by demonstrating how well Mimimi could respond in an unexpected situation.

I couldn’t compete in Hinami’s ring. So I built my own.

Mimimi paused for a minute, then smiled brightly. She coughed again.

“By the way, are you going to vote for me?”

Bebeep!

“Would you like me to search the Web for ‘By the way, are you sewing a tote for me?’”

“What the heck?!”

The audience kept laughing. Then she gave the clincher.

“It looks like Siri’s not going to vote for me, but I hope all of you will!”

Having gotten a final laugh with her parting words, Mimimi walked off the stage waving both hands comically. Okay. We did it.

We did it!

I watched in relief as the audience sent Mimimi off with applause and laughter. Then I picked up my phone and climbed back down to the wings of the stage.

* * *

“We did it—”

When I got back to the wings, Mimimi’s head was whipping back and forth, like she’d lost something. The instant she saw me, she came running over and jumped into my arms, whispering excitedly.

“Oof!”

She threw her arms around me. I yelped as quietly as I could, tried not to pay attention to the soft something pressing up against my stomach, and panted, “L-let go...!”

“Coming on too strong for you, Tomozaki?” she said teasingly as she unwrapped her arms. More like too soft than too strong.

“Nice job, Mimimi...and Tomozaki-kun?”

The voice as beautiful as a chiming bell was coming from—you guessed it—Hinami. Wonder how much she had to practice to master such a pleasant whisper... Well, the numbers on her voice recorder tell the story.

Mimimi smiled like a sunflower.

“Thanks, Aoi! Let’s just say a lot went on behind the scenes of this speech, so don’t ask me for the details!”

“Behind the scenes...? Okay, we’ll leave it at that!” Hinami played along.

“Yes, please!” Mimimi chirped. “Just remember Tomozaki deserves a lot of the credit!”

Mimimi grabbed my arm. *Wait a second, stop.* Once again, her boobs were pressed up against me. *I’m not ready for this yet. Isn’t that the kind of attack that should happen in the later stages of the boss fight?*

“He does, huh?”

As Hinami made a puzzled face and laughed half-heartedly, Mizusawa showed up.

“Good job out there—huh?”

He looked surprised that Mimimi and I had our arms linked. Mimimi smiled suggestively.

“Takahiro... That’s how things are now.”

“No, it’s not!” I whispered back as forcefully as I could to head off the unwanted implications. Mizusawa and Hinami exchanged glances and nodded, smiling.

“Let’s go.”

With that, the two of them walked out of the wings side by side.

Oh yeah—after the speeches we were supposed to join our classes in line.

“...Hey, Tomozaki.”

“Yeah?”

Mimimi gave me a syrupy smile.

“The way those two were acting...doesn’t it seem like they’re dating?”

“What?!”

And all of my attempts to keep quiet went for nothing.

We rejoined our class and listened as Ms. Kawamura made some announcements about student affairs and voting, which caused some snickering since it came right after Mimimi’s impression of her. That wrapped up the assembly. Apparently, anonymous ballots would be handed out, and each student would mark their choice. They could either use the desks and pens set up on our way back to class and stick them in the boxes there or give them to their homeroom teachers before school let out. Campaign managers and candidates weren’t allowed to vote. Huh. Guess I was.

As soon as the assembly ended, Mimimi and Hinami were surrounded by students. Made sense—both of them had gotten the audience excited. I glanced at them as I left the gym by myself.

I stood for a minute in front of the ballot box. I was going to vote for Mimimi, but my gamer spirit and commitment to fair play stopped me. I turned in a blank ballot. I figured one vote wouldn’t matter, and I wanted to do this right.

After school, I was supposed to meet with Hinami for the first time in quite a while. I figured she’d want me to fill her in and review my performance. I felt a complicated mixture of melancholy and anticipation.

But before that was something even more important.

When I left the classroom, I could see a cluster of students at the other end of the hall. Must be what the teacher had mentioned in the final homeroom of the day: At the earliest, the election results might be available today after school.

I glanced back. Mimimi was still in the classroom. I tried to calm my nerves with a few deep breaths as I approached the crowd.

Everyone was looking at one of the postings on the bulletin board.

Student Council Election Results

~~As for Mimimi:~~

~~Mimimi~~ Hinami:

I let out the breath I'd been holding, realized I had something more urgent than going to my meeting with Hinami, and headed back to the classroom.

* * *

I found a spot right outside the classroom, where Mimimi wouldn't be able to see me from where she was chatting with the other normies, and waited. Instead of calling out to her when I already knew what the results were, it would be best to wait until she decided to go see the results for herself and then pretend to bump into her. Or, to be more precise, it was the only way not to make a mess of things. When you're a bottom-tier character, decisions kind of make themselves.

My phone buzzed. When I checked it, I saw Hinami had sent me a LINE message. I'd sent her a message a minute ago (*"Going to be late to the meeting. Might not make it at all. I'll tell you more later. Sorry."*), and she had just answered.

"I see. Let's cancel for today," hers read.

Sorry, Hinami... I know this is my second last-minute cancellation in a row...

I was about to reply when another message arrived from her.

"However, be sure to make some progress in the meantime. Understood?"

...Ha-ha. Nothing got past her. She really was unmatched.

"Understood."

Hinami's words fired up my motivation—but all I could do was wait.

"Hey, Tomozaki!"

Mimimi was coming out of the classroom. Hiding my nerves, I put on a light tone.

"Hey. Good work today."

"Thanks! Same to you!"

Her smile was as bright as ever. This was where it got hard. I introduced the topic just like I'd planned it out in my head.

"By the way, the results are up on the bulletin—"

"I know! Too bad, huh?"

Mimimi cut me off. *Huh?*

She slapped her forehead and laughed. She wasn't looking at me.

"Y-you saw already...?"

"No, but my friend sent me a LINE message. So I know!"

"...Oh, really?"

I didn't know what to say.

“Yeah! I was shook! But getting the news out of the blue actually softened the shock!”

“Ah-ha-ha... A silver lining, huh?”

I was wondering what *shook* meant, but I figured this wasn’t the right time to ask, so I just played along.

“Exactly! Well, I’ll just have to try for a win again sometime!”

“As they say, failure is the foundation of success.”

“Yes, exactly! Failure is the foundation of success! You always know what to say, Tomozaki. Be positive! Walk with the wind at your back! If you fall, run faster to catch up! That’s the way to go!”

Was Mimimi’s cheerfulness real or fake? A non-normie like me had no idea.

“...Yeah, guess so! You’re on the same sports team as Hinami, and there are plenty of tests to come! And...I’m sure there will be other chances, too! You can fight her again then!”

“Of course!”

Normally, this would be when she thumped my shoulder, but this time the thump didn’t come. Had I simply misread the moment, or was it because I had evaded her last time? Or was there another reason? As usual, I had no idea.

* * *

“Phew...guess I’ll go home.”

Mimimi had headed off to the track after our conversation, saying, “I’ve got practice! Gotta make up for the days I missed for the election!” I still hadn’t gotten a response to the apologetic sandwich of a message I’d sent Hinami fifteen minutes earlier, which read, “*Sorry, no progress. Sorry.*” I didn’t have anything left to do. Instead of loitering around school, it would be more productive to go home and use the voice recorder to practice my comebacks or something. Yeah, that was a good plan.

I glanced into the classroom, figuring no one would be around since club activities were already going on. But someone was in there—Tama-chan. Her back was to me, but I could tell it was her because of how small she was. She was staring out the classroom window at the field. What was she up to? Whatever, I needed some more independent study!

“No club today?” I called, staying far enough away to avoid surprising her. A creature of the shadows like myself is only permitted so close to a woodland animal like her.

“...Tomozaki.”

Maybe it was because the setting sun backlit her as she turned around, but I sensed something listless to her expression. The sun was

shining through her fluffy chestnut hair, giving her a halo. She stepped to the side a little, like she was making room for me, then looked back out the window. Okay, she was telling me to come over to her. Got it. Small but powerful she was.

“What are you looking at?”

I crept cautiously up to her, making every effort to look like I wasn’t cautiously creeping up, and followed her gaze out the window. The track team was practicing. Oh right—you could see the field from here.

“See for yourself,” Tama-chan said, looking gloomily at the field. “Aoi and Minmi are way out ahead of everyone else.”

“Huh.”

I stared at the practice, scrutinizing every detail below me. Just as Tama-chan had said, the two of them ran endlessly on, showing no sign of looking down or placing their hands on their knees. They were fast, and their pauses were short.

“But...Minmi isn’t usually like that. She usually goes at her own pace.”

“Huh. Do you always watch them?”

“No, just occasionally, when I want to skip volleyball practice.” For some reason, she glared at me.

“You’re not skipping *tamarrow*, are you?”

“N-no, I am not,” she said, looking out the window again.

“I think she’s probably competing with Aoi. I mean, I’m sure she is!”

“Ha-ha-ha...could be.” Tama-chan sounded a little angry. She really did care about Mimimi.

“That was too bad about the election, huh?”

“Oh yeah. It was.” Tama-chan giggled. “That thing with Siri was all planned in advance, right?”

She’d helped me test the sound out, so of course she knew.

“Yeah, it was all staged.”

“Foul play!” Her tone was as serious as ever, but a smile was playing around her lips.

“...But we still didn’t win.”

“Well...you were up against Aoi,” she said as if it was completely obvious.

“So you thought it was a lost cause, too?”

“Yup,” she said plainly. “Aoi’s amazing. You can’t beat her.”

“...Guess you’re right.”

I sighed. Even Tama-chan viewed it that way.

“But Minmi...”

“What?”

“Even if she can’t win, she won’t give in,” she said with a sad

smile. "That's why..."

She looked down. I didn't know exactly what she meant, but I had a guess.

"I just wish she'd let it go with Aoi."

"...Hmm."

"She's a little...scary? I'm not sure how to put it."

"...Huh."

Tama-chan kept going, completely unfiltered. Some of what she said I understood and some I didn't, but I thought it would be insincere to ask a bunch of detailed questions or pretend to sympathize with her, so I just listened quietly and offered a word or two here and there. I'm not sure if that was a good strategy or not. But I did learn one thing: Like I suspected, Mimimi's cheerfulness a little earlier was—

"...Oh, sorry! I've been talking your ear off!"

"No, don't worry about it!"

In fact, I hadn't memorized any topics that would be natural to introduce in this situation, so it was a relief. I was thinking about my own mistakes, too.

"I'm going to head to club now. See you later, Tomozaki!"

"Okay, see you later."

Tama-chan picked up her bag off her desk, gave me a little wave, and left the classroom. I stayed there for a while, gazing down absently at the track. Hinami was running. Mimimi was running. They worked on their form, stretched, and practiced for specific events. Occasionally, they chatted a bit, but they never relaxed their focus or got any less intense. As their bodies glistened in the sunlight, beaded with the sweat of self-improvement, they were practically shining with determination to make the most of their youth.

—It wasn't just the two of them, of course. In the heat of summer, all the track team members were out there practicing for hours every day. Of course, that was normal.

They were all working so hard to beat this game, weren't they?

5

It's hard not to give up on training characters who just won't improve

I was getting more into this whole normie thing, so on Saturday, I went all the way to Omiya and got some of the wax Mizusawa had used on my hair. Then on Sunday, Hinami and I played a bunch of rounds of *Atafami* for the first time in a while. And then it was Monday again, and we had our first meeting in a week.

"First of all...good game last week."

"Thanks... You too."

We verbally patted each other on the back. Of course, I'd lost to her.

"Before we start the meeting, I want to ask you something."

"Okay."

Hinami's eyes sparkled. I recognized that look—it was her "we're about to talk gaming" face.

"The Siri thing—you guys planned all that, right?"

Even though her eyes were sparkling, she wasn't talking about gaming. She was talking about the speech, which meant my suspicions were correct.

She had viewed the speech as a game and thoroughly enjoyed it.

I'd felt the same myself at first, but my sense of responsibility toward Mimimi and the regret and shame I felt over losing had overwritten that feeling with the desire for revenge.

"Yeah, it was all scripted. The alarm, the questions, the whole thing."

"Ah-ha-ha!" For once, Hinami laughed as hard as she could.

"I thought we could take the election with that...but no such luck."

I'd done my best and even come up with a clever trick, but Hinami had still gotten more than double the votes we had. Those results demonstrated the enormous gap between us in terms of our day-in, day-out training. It was truly humiliating.

"True, that was the final outcome, but..." Hinami leaned toward me, her big eyes glittering like jewels. "...You surprised me. I had fun."

“Huh,” I murmured vaguely.

Actually, I leaned away a little when I saw her expression. It was so...I don't know what to call it. It wasn't her normal practiced one; it was something else entirely. She reminded me of a little girl on the way home from the amusement park talking about everything she just got to do. Or to be more straightforward, she looked so damn cute, I was in danger of losing to her completely.

“That felt like a nanashi strategy. Guess that legendary guy who overturned the norms of *Atafami* and changed it from a brute-strength game to a combo game wasn't all smoke and mirrors.”

Hinami was weirdly wound up, praising me to the heavens with excitement. It was incredibly embarrassing. Plus, she knew what I'd done in *Atafami*. Guess that made sense.

“Okay, okay. But weren't you playing a little dirty?”

“Whatever could you mean?” She raised her eyebrows and smiled innocently.

“Uh, you crushed our entire strategy?”

“Oh, that.” She smiled smugly. “You screwed up big-time.”

“What?”

“Remember Thursday?” she said, raising a finger in the air. “You let slip that you were helping Mimimi. That put me on guard. If nanashi was involved, I knew I had to change my strategy.”

“...Oh.”

It all started to make sense.

“If you were so involved that you had to skip our meeting, I knew you'd have something up your sleeve. This was nanashi after all. That's why I decided to squash your efficient vote-winning platform with brute force.”

She looked as innocent as a child showing off her favorite trinkets.



So my message to her on LINE had tipped her off to my strategy, and she'd taken her counterstrategy that far?

"...I underestimated you."

I admitted my failure flat out, although I still hadn't recovered from her high evaluation of nanashi.

"Anyway! I won by a landslide this time, but I got a sense of your potential! You surprised me! It really was fun! The key is to keep leveling up in life. Understand?"

She was obviously way more intense than usual. The mere inch between her face and mine, the sparkle in her eyes pulling me in, and that abnormally good smell coming from her were really getting to me right now.

"I was planning to even before you said so," I told her, which was the truth.

"Good answer," she said, then coughed. "All right, let's talk about your assignments for this week..."

With that, we returned to my usual training routine. It was kind of nostalgic and kind of tough, and I got a faraway look in my eyes.

First, in order to achieve my small goal of going out alone with a girl, Hinami informed me that I was to finish reading an entire Michael Andi book today and invite Kikuchi-san to go see a movie based on a book by that author.

According to Hinami, there was a theater in Shibuya where they were still playing an Andi movie that came out a while back, which she said would work out just right. Ah, so this is where the lesson at the movie theater would pay off. Thank you, Hinami.

"Also, what are your thoughts about the speech? Based on what you wrote for Mimimi, it seems you're starting to understand the importance of jokes."

"...Guess so."

After all, my own life was proof enough that if you don't start by considering how the person you're talking to might receive it, then any plan is doomed to fail. I figured jokes were the flip side of that.

"When you become someone's girlfriend or boyfriend, you're basically putting your trust in each other. There are a lot of ways to build trust, but I think jokes are your best weapon when it comes to taking the first step, which is getting that person to feel comfortable opening up to you and listening to what you have to say."

I understood her point, but I felt uneasy as I wondered what assignment was coming.

"Yeah...I get what you're saying."

"So today's assignment is to make one person laugh."

"...Gulp. Thought so."

You make it sound easy, Hinami, but isn't that a little advanced for me?

* * *

It was break time before fourth period. I paused for a second in front of the library, feeling nervous. Asking her to the movies. Okay, so Hinami hadn't said we had to make a plan today, but I still had some thoughts on the matter. I mean, this was my first time ever asking a girl out. On top of that, I was supposed to make her laugh.

"Tomozaki-kun...?"

"Ack!"

A voice as beautiful as a bubbling spring called my name from behind. When I turned around, standing there was an elf who had hidden her pointed ears and slipped into an ordinary high school in order to learn the ways of the human world—I mean, there was Kikuchi-san.

"Um, are you going in...?"

"Oh, um, yeah. I am, uh-huh."

I felt my face getting hot as she stared at me with eyes that seemed like they would reveal magical healing powers if I only looked deep enough into them, but I managed to walk into the library. I'd used all my breaks since morning to burn through the rest of the Andi book I'd already started. It was decently interesting, so I got through it quickly enough.

Kikuchi-san pulled out her book and settled in to start reading. Wondering if she was truly an angel, I picked up a new Andi book, inched my chair the tiniest bit closer to her than last time, and sat down.

I felt like I'd stepped into a forest where elves, humans, and animals live together in harmony. Part of me just wanted to soak up that atmosphere, but I had an assignment to do.

"...Kikuchi-san."

"What is it?"

She shifted her eyes away from her book and looked at me with a gaze as gentle as a young maiden playing with the fish in a forest spring.

"Um, a-actually..."

As I was struggling to continue, Kikuchi-san tilted her head quizzically like a little squirrel, which severely distracted me and made my pause even longer.

"...Um," I said, returning to my senses. "There's a theater that's playing a movie based on an Andi book..."

"Sh-Shibuya!"

Surprised by the loudness of her own voice, she blushed and hid half of her face behind her book.

“S-sorry.”

“N-no, no.”

She looked way too cute with just her eyes popping up above her book, and on top of that, she was blushing so furiously that I could tell just from the little strip of bright-red forehead that was visible, and before I knew it, I was getting shy, too.

“...Tomozaki-kun, you’re blushing.”

“N-no, you’re blushing more!”

“...*Sigh.*”

Kikuchi-san’s sigh sounded very happy. With the book still covering her face, she looked up at me. *Hey, that’s not fair!*

“Anyway...I finished one of Andi’s books, and I liked it, so I thought I’d try reading some more, and...”

“Oh, that’s great!”

She sounded nervous, probably because she could guess what I was about to say. My nervousness had definitely spread to her.

“A-and do you want to...go see that movie together?”

“...Okay.”

By now, she’d hidden her whole face behind the book, but even the backs of her hands were completely red. That was just unfair.



After school, I told Hinami what had happened with Kikuchi-san. Her only response was a simple directive to “keep pursuing her along those lines.” As for the assignment to make someone laugh, I told her Kikuchi-san had giggled a bit, and she responded that it barely counted as a pass.

Ignoring my emotional turmoil, she kept her tone completely flat. She even seemed bored. “Lucky you. You get to stay on easy mode this time. Don’t get too full of yourself,” she warned me.

Speaking of which, I always went straight home after our meetings, but Hinami went to track practice. She really did push herself. I thought about it and decided I should work a bit harder myself. Kikuchi-san would be going to that movie after reading a whole bunch of Andi’s books, so I figured I’d try to read as many as I could tonight, too. We had class in the other classroom again tomorrow, so time was limited.

I headed to the library and looked in. The librarian was the only person in there. Huh. I thought Kikuchi-san might be there, but it looked like she went home after school, like everyone else. I picked up the book I’d started earlier and continued reading it.

I had to admit his books were good. If I’d never met Kikuchi-san, I probably never would have picked up one of these mystical, straitlaced fantasy novels. At first glance, they looked like tough reads, but once you started, they were surprisingly addictive. Their made-up world had a bunch of strangely realistic details to remind you that his world worked differently from ours, and every time I came to one of them, I couldn’t help wondering if the Andi world really did exist somewhere. Every time I found a trace of order in its strange, seemingly illogical words and rules, it was like I could see its colors more brightly, and even smell it.

I was really getting into it. Time flew by as I turned the pages. Before I knew it, I’d reached the end of the thick book. That was awesome!

I checked the time. Whoa. Three hours had passed. It was just before seven. Before leaving, I wandered over to the window, glanced down at the field below, and practically jumped.

On that dark field, the energy of the afternoon had vanished, and most of the club activities were over, but two figures remained. I squinted at them.

It was Hinami and Mimimi.

Hinami was practicing a few different events without resting.

Mimimi was practicing her run-ups and leaps for the high jump, also without breaks. I could instantly see the intensity in their movements, and Mimimi's faint, fleeting smile floated before my mind's eye.

That's why I want to win.

I could understand that. I was a gamer, after all. And I hated to lose. Losing to someone over and over sucked. It was humiliating. It made you want to bite back out of pure stubbornness.

I watched them run and run. Sometimes they helped each other out practicing for the same event, and sometimes they practiced on their own. After a while, the two victory-obsessed runners started to amiably clean up the field. I watched them finish, then snuck toward home so they wouldn't know I'd been watching.

* * *

"Yeah, Mimimi never practices that long," Hinami said the next morning after I asked her about practice the day before; that was her response.

"Really? I figured she must do that now and then."

"Nope. I was always the only one who stayed to the very end."

"...Heh."

I let out a nervous chuckle. Scary how she made that sound completely natural.

"By the way, she got to morning practice before me today, too."

"Wow." *Seriously? I mean...* "You always come here after morning practice?"

"Yes, and...?"

Seriously? She'd never been winded or given any other sign that she was tired.

Anyway, about Mimimi...if what Hinami said was true, then she'd taken her loss in the election as an opportunity to work herself even harder, starting yesterday. In other words, she didn't want to lose again. I glanced at Hinami. She seemed lost in thought, somehow lacking her usual confidence.

"By the way...I wanted to ask you something."

For once, she sounded genuinely curious about what I had to say.

"Wh-what?" I asked, feeling a bit suspicious.

"I think you're like this, too, but when I play games, especially *Atafami...*" She spoke slowly, like she was searching for the right words. "I establish my goal, analyze my current situation, and supplement whatever I'm lacking through trial and error. The process

of moving forward with those steps is what's usually called 'effort,' right?"

"Yeah, guess so."

I'd never tried to come up with a detailed definition like that, but anyway.

"Let's call it that for now. Through constant effort, you forge ahead."

Hinami looked deep into my eyes.

"You never compromise and move forward, always forward—"

Hinami seemed to be looking at something beyond my comprehension with a duller light in her eyes than usual.

"Do you think that's a bad thing?"

— I didn't understand what she was trying to say. Or to be more precise, I understood what she was saying, but I didn't understand why she was even asking that question. I mean, how could that be a bad thing?

"Not that my thoughts matter, but I don't think it is."

"Well, then." Looks like she already had her answer. "I don't think so, either. There's no way that could be a bad thing."

"Exactly."

"Okay, then..."

Was she asking me a rhetorical question to suggest something? What was with her?

"But listen—quite a few people would say it is a bad thing, right?" she said. "They'd say you should just be yourself, as if not changing is more virtuous than changing, which is clearly delusional."

"Why are you always trying to fight these huge battles?"

What was she trying to do?

"That's not the point right now. There are other types, too, right? People like Erika Konno who sneer at any kind of effort and call people 'uncool' for working hard."

"Uh-huh." Yeah, that type does exist. "Speaking of Erika Konno, I do think she was wrong to make fun of Nakamura for making an effort."

"And Nakamura was right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Although he shouldn't have made everyone stay and watch."

Hinami nodded, smiling wryly. "True enough."

"But when someone who's not trying makes fun of someone who is, it's jealousy, plain and simple," I said. "I'll always support the one who's trying... Of course, you don't want to force someone." Once you start making it obligatory, like, "Make an effort!" then you risk

imposing your values on someone else.

“Hey, was that aimed at me?”

“Whoa, don’t take things the wrong way. I’m letting you tell me what to do. You didn’t force it on me. I’ll quit the minute I decide life’s a shitty game,” I fired back, grinning.

“Yep,” Hinami said, smiling back. “But when you make an effort at life, things happen that you can’t back out of that easily. At least that’s been my experience. But don’t worry about that too much. I basically agree with you.”

“...Hmm.”

Her experience, huh? Guess she meant I wouldn’t understand until I experienced it myself.

“...Anyway, we’ve gotten way offtrack. I’m going to announce today’s assignment now. Same as yesterday, I want you to make one person laugh, and on top of that, I want you to ask Mimimi to connect on LINE.”

“O...kay.”

“When I say make someone laugh, I don’t mean like last time. A little giggle doesn’t count.”

“Seriously...?”

“Yes. I know it’s a little advanced, so consider it a challenge. It’s okay if you don’t succeed right away, as long as you do it within a couple of days.”

“Gotcha.”

A couple of days, huh?

“As for the Mimimi assignment, you made a serious mistake by not asking when you were helping her with the election. Do it as soon as you can. I can’t believe you haven’t already.”

“I-I’m sorry...” That was all I could say, given the stupidity of my mistake. “By the way, how should I ask her...?”

“Come on, you can figure that out.”

“What?? Hinami-san, haven’t your assignments been a bit general lately? I mean, I have no idea how to make someone laugh, either!”

She sighed.

“Listen. I didn’t want to have to say this, but you’re past that stage.”

“Huh?”

“If I told you to give such-and-such reason and say this or that when you friended her on LINE, how would you feel?”

“...Oh.”

Now it made sense. If she helped decide exactly what to say, the assignment probably wouldn’t feel very hard. All I’d need to do was put her plan into action. But if she’d given me the same assignment back when I first met her, even with support, it probably would have

felt impossible.

“The rising difficulty of your assignments means you’re advancing. Over these past few weeks, you’ve learned to take action. Now you’ve reached the stage where you need to develop the ability to think for yourself. So can you quit asking me for instant instructions already?”

She may have been blunt, but she was recognizing my progress. On top of that, my assignments reflected that. It made me oddly happy.

“H-Hinami...,” I said emotionally.

“Don’t be weird about this,” she shot back with cold eyes. Oof. Tuesday had begun.

* * *

From first period to lunch, I thought about how to ask Mimimi to connect on LINE, but I couldn’t come up with a good idea. So I swallowed my shame and launched a strategy anyway.

“...Izumi.”

“What?”

You guessed it. When in doubt, ask a normie.

“When you ask someone to connect on LINE, what reason do you use?”

“Huh? Reason?” She sounded baffled by my question.

“Y-you know, like if you talk to someone all the time but you don’t know their LINE ID and you want to ask them, what...uh...?”

That was as far as I got before Izumi’s confused expression got the better of me, and my voice trailed off. However, she was kind enough to give my stupid question a serious answer.

“I don’t really give a reason...,” she answered.

An electric current shot through my brain.

There is no reason!

She’d just flipped my world upside down.

“R-really? Thanks, Izumi!” I said excitedly, which caused her to look even more confused and say “Huh?” Right away I sent Hinami a LINE message that started out with “*Major discovery!*” and went on to enthusiastically explain Izumi’s comment.

I came right back down to Earth when I got her response: “*Only a total geek would get excited over that.*” Yeah, that wasn’t really cause for so much excitement...

Anyway, realizing that I didn’t need a reason was a major step forward. I pulled myself together and flagged down Mimimi on her way to the cafeteria.

“Mimimi!”

“Huh? Oh, hey, Tomozaki!” She smiled cheerfully at me. S-

someone's accepting me...!

"Uh, give me your LINE."

"That's the first thing you say to me?!"

She opened her big eyes even wider. Of course she did. It was definitely weird to pop the question the instant I saw her.

"Oh, uh, I don't really have a reason or anything..."

Of course, I had to go for my default approach and say exactly what I was thinking. Whoops.

"Well, no surprise there! You're smart, but you've got a wild streak, Tomozaki."

Wild?! No one's ever called me that before. I don't think I am. Plus, I'm not that smart.

"I do? News to me..."

"Figures! It's like you don't know how to lie."

"Ah." Lies are basically one form of tactfulness in conversations, and I'm awful at tact. "You could be right."

"Right? Watch out for bad women!" She brought her mouth right up to my ear. "Like me." She blew softly on my ear.

"Ack?!"

"Oh, here's my LINE ID."

She held up her QR code, looking genuinely pleased by my overreaction. Ever since the speech, she'd been a little too harsh on me, in my opinion.

"Right..."

I managed to pull it off without a hitch. I'd already connected with Hinami and Izumi on LINE, and even if I wasn't used to this use of technology, I wasn't a total Luddite. Too bad for you, Mr. Loner!

"Oh, there it is! Thanks!"

Mimimi's username was Minami Nanami. It was like she was proud of having such a mouthful of a name.

I could have just said "Thanks" and slipped away, but I figured I might as well snag some more EXP by talking a little longer. Anyway, I'd refreshed my stock of conversation topics.

"Hey, I hear you've been going hard at practice lately."

"Huh? Oh yeah, I have! I've been working super hard. And I'm busting my butt studying, too. Man, am I a hard worker these days! I've got to make up for losing the election!"

Maybe because she didn't want everyone in class to hear her, she lowered her voice a little at the end.

"Yeah. I'm cheering for you. We gamers know the feeling." We'd talked about that stuff a little, so I was able to be honest with her.

"Oh yeah, that's right! Thanks, gamer Tomozaki! But who told you about practice?"

"Uh, Hinami."

“Wouldn’t have guessed that!”

“Really?”

“Nope. How did she say it?”

Wh-what kind of question is that? I wasn’t sure how to answer. She’d said, *By the way, she got to morning practice before me today*, but I couldn’t exactly tell Mimimi she’d been that straightforward. *Uh, um...*

“Uh, she said it like normal... I mean, like she always does.”

I couldn’t think of a lie, but I did keep my answer sketchy. Well, brutal honesty *was* normal Hinami from my perspective.

“Oh, really? Huh.” Mimimi nodded. I didn’t get why she asked in the first place.

“Anyway, I’m going to the cafeteria! Are you getting school lunch today?”

“No, today I’m going for bread.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Okay, see you later!” she said, spinning around toward the cafeteria.

Wait a second, did I just get invited to the cafeteria? I was so caught off guard that I told her what my original plan was, but maybe I should have gone along with her for the EXP. Damn! But later when I stuck my head into the cafeteria, I saw Nakamura at her table. *Glad I turned her down after all.*

After school, I told Hinami I’d connected with Mimimi on LINE, but I hadn’t made anyone laugh yet, which pretty much wrapped up our meeting. I headed to the library afterward and started in on another Andi book.

Apparently, each book was a totally different world, but I noticed some common elements sprinkled in here and there. The more I read, the more I got pulled in. Forget EXP—I just wanted to talk to Kikuchisan about his books for the fun of it.

I finished off the book, stood up, and wandered over to the window to look down at the field.

As I expected, Hinami and Mimimi were the only ones left at practice.

Working hard.

I nodded to myself and headed toward our classroom. I’d planned to stay late today, so I’d left my bag on my desk. I trudged through the abandoned school. When I noisily slid open the door to the classroom, there was Tama-chan sitting by the window. Second time now. She was starting to look like a fixture in that window. She turned toward me, startled.

“...Tomozaki?”

“Oh, sorry.” I automatically apologized for surprising her.

“You don’t have to apologize!”

Stern and scolding as usual.

“O-oh, right.”

I couldn’t help feeling flustered.

“What’s your story today?” she said, moving over again to make room for me.

“Um, I was reading in the library.”

I sat down next to Tama-chan as naturally as I could when I was quaking with nerves.

“You like to read?”

“Uh, kind of. I’ve been reading lately, I mean...”

“Huh?”

She looked slightly confused. Of course, I couldn’t exactly tell her I was reading to get ready for my movie date with Kikuchi-san.

“How about you?” I asked, before guessing the answer. “Watching practice?”

“Yeah.”

After all, she’d said she wasn’t coming “tamarrow,” but that was last week.

“...Wow,” I said, looking at my watch. “You’ve been here this whole time?”

“No! I have not! Volleyball practice ended already. I stopped by afterward.”

“Oh, right.”

I get it. After volleyball, she stops by to check on Mimimi.

“Right.”

The conversation hit a lull. *What do I do? I don’t have anything to talk about!* But wait, that’s the power of Hinami-style topic memorization! I hadn’t prepared many topics specifically to use on Tama-chan, but after last time, when she did most of the talking, I’d thought up a couple! Look at that!

“Mimimi’s working hard, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Uh-oh, the conversation stopped again. Better fire off a supplementary round.

“I heard she got to morning practice before Hinami today.”

“Really? Huh... Who told you that? Aoi?”

“Yeah, Hinami.”

“It’s the election, isn’t it? Like I thought.” Tama-chan frowned.

“Yeah. Mimimi genuinely set out to win, so I think it was a painful loss for her. For me, too.”

“Huh.”

Okay, one more! “That thing about the magic fingers the other day...”

“You don’t give up, do you? If you’re so curious, why don’t you

ask Mimimi?"

Oops. Better not ask her about that anymore. Um... Okay, got something else! "You and Mimimi are close, huh?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"When did you two become friends?"

"Um," she said, pausing for just a second. "Second semester of first year?"

"So you weren't friends in first semester?"

"It was more that...I don't have many friends, so I didn't talk to Minmi much the first semester."

"Oh..."

Once again, I didn't know what to say. *Um, related topics!*

"So why are you so close now?"

"Um, well..."

Tama-chan looked down at the field and then back at me before smiling mischievously. "I guess 'cause she's an idiot?"

"...What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"We didn't talk in first semester, but somehow after that, she found me, and all of a sudden, I couldn't get away from her even if I wanted to."

"Huh. Sudden how?"

Tama-chan got a faraway look. "Yeah...she started pinching my cheeks every day."

"I—I can imagine that." I smirked a little.

"But I'm not good at that stuff, so I acted like it annoyed me."

"Ah-ha-ha." I could imagine that, too.

"I'd either ignore her, glare at her, or try something else, but she wouldn't quit. She says annoying people excites her!"

"Ha-ha-ha! I can hear her saying that," I said, laughing out loud.

"I thought she was silly, but thanks to her, I started making more friends, and I felt more comfortable in class."

"...Huh." I liked this story.

"I'm amazed by people who make friends easily. I looked up to the way she just naturally pulled people in, including me...and that's when Aoi came along."

So *she* was showing up in the story. "Hinami, huh?" I said, and Tama-chan nodded.

"She came and talked to me out of the blue. We were in different classes, so we'd never talked before, but after we chatted a little, all of a sudden, she goes, 'Are you the girl who's hanging out with Minmi?'"

I don't think Hinami would call her Minmi, but who was I to point that out? "That's kinda abrupt."

"According to Aoi, before Minmi started hanging out with me, she asked Aoi for advice."

“Advice?”

“Yeah. Apparently, she said, ‘There’s a girl who doesn’t fit in with my class; what should I do?’”

“Wow.” That was surprising.

“But Aoi said she said, ‘What if she doesn’t want to be part of the group?’”

“Good point.” I don’t think it’s right to force everyone into the group.

“But Minmi didn’t bend, according to Aoi. ‘I don’t think that’s true for her. She tries to be part of things, but she’s too clumsy to make it work.’”

“Really?” I wondered which one of them had it right.

“Well...that was exactly what was going on. I tend to get into conflicts with people, so I tried not to interact too much... I was afraid, so I avoided people. But it’s not that I didn’t want friends. I just didn’t know what to do. She nailed it.”

“Huh...wonder how she knew.”

“No idea. But anyway, Hinami suggested that she talk to me a little bit every day.” Tama-chan sounded both happy and shocked by this.

“...So...”

“So all of a sudden, Minmi started pinching my cheeks! Weird, right?” She pointed down to Mimimi on the field.

“Ha-ha-ha. That sounds like her. She’s all about brute force—a little too rough maybe.”

“Right! She’s kinda dumb, huh?” she said happily. “But Aoi made me promise I’d never tell Minmi what she told me.”

“Really? Wonder why.”

“She said she’d be embarrassed, and I should let her keep her facade.”

“Good call.” I was touched. That was surprisingly kind of her.

“But Aoi wanted me to know that Minmi was bugging me every day for my own sake, ‘cause she was worried about me. ‘Cause Minmi really is an idiot, she said.”

“Huh. Yeah.” Hinami did have her good points.

“Then a little while after that happened, I asked Minmi about it a few times. ‘Why’d you take such an interest in me?’ I said.”

“Uh-huh.” I wondered how Mimimi responded.

“And she always answered like, ‘I just love cute things,’ or ‘I go into withdrawal if I can’t touch soft cheeks every day...!’ Even though she was really trying to help me.”

“...Yeah.”

“So now, if she nibbles on my ear or something, I say, ‘I love it!’ I’ll laugh about it.”

“...Huh.”

I felt something rising in my chest, but I just nudged her along.

“Even though I know everything, I pretend I don’t. She acts all cheerful, but she’s always coming to my rescue. And I’ll keep pretending as long as she needs me to.”

Pulled in by her story, I fell silent. So that’s what had happened between them.

Eventually, a gentle motherly smile spread over Tama-chan’s childish features.

“See what I mean? Minmi’s an idiot.”

* * *

“Tama, you taste saltier than usual today!”

“What right do you have to compare how people taste?!”

Tama-chan and I had walked down to the field after Hinami and Mimimi finished practice and were helping them clean up. Afterward, the four of us headed home together.

“I have every right! My point is, right after practice your sweat is fresh, but this time it’s had a little while to dry, so the flavor is more concentrated...!”

“Gross! Use your deductive powers somewhere else!”

The two of them were teasing each other, as usual.

Ignoring the girl-on-girl show, Hinami fell into step with me.

“What were you doing at school all this time? Did you join a club or something?”

Translation: *Please inform me of any major life changes.*

“There was a book I wanted to read, so I went to the library. When I finished and stopped by our classroom, Tama-chan was there, so I asked her some things I’d been wondering about, and we talked for a while.”

Translation: *I was working on the Kikuchi-san assignment. Since Tama-chan was in our classroom, I mobilized some of the topics I’d memorized and had a decent conversation.*

“Oh really!”

Translation: *Thank you for your report. You’re still awkward and gross.* Well, maybe not that second part. Why do I always take the worst interpretation?

“Understood, Tama-san. My sincere apologies. Today, please allow me to nibble on your elbow...”

“You are relentless! I don’t get you!”

Overhearing this totally bizarre exchange, Hinami bopped Mimimi on the head.

“Okay, Mimimi, that’s enough.”

“Yessir, Captain!” She gave a sharp salute.

“Geez, Minmi...when are you going to calm down?”

“Let’s see,” Mimimi said, looking serious. “Maybe when I get a job?”

“Wow, a real answer!”

Hinami was right there with a comeback. They were in perfect harmony. That made total sense, of course. Like Tama-chan had explained, the bonds between the three of them were super strong. I watched them, wishing they could stay like this forever and thinking about friendship between girls and how great it was. I was walking with them, but I was a complete outsider. I guess that was a bad habit on my part.

“Okay, then how about this? First I’ll offer you the back of my knee...”

“I have no interest in the back of your knee!”

Whenever Tama-chan scolded her like that, Mimimi always opened her mouth wide and laughed like she was really happy. To me, that smile looked completely real and pure. No one asked me, but I think Mimimi was working hard to protect this place, this bond that brought her utter happiness.

But the next day, she started acting a little strange.

“Oh, um, sorry! I wasn’t sleeping! I just lost consciousness for a second! I definitely wasn’t sleeping!”

A ripple of laughter passed through the class.

“Okay, okay! On to the next question...”

“I’m sorry!”

It was third period. The teacher had asked Mimimi to answer a question, but she had clearly fallen asleep at her desk. I’d only been in the same class as her for three months, but I couldn’t remember that ever happening before. And this was the third time today.

So what’s my point? Well, I had a few thoughts.

“...Sigh.”

When I looked over at her, she was frowning and exhaling loudly, like she was trying to pull herself together.

After class, Tama-chan went up to her.

“Minmi, are you okay?”

Mimimi smiled and thumped her chest. “No! I started watching this dumb comedy movie last night, and I couldn’t stop! I stayed up most of the night! I am so tired! Super tired! Nanami down!”

“No, I mean really, are you okay?” Tama-chan was being even

firmer than usual. She genuinely sounded scary.

"I am not okay! I wish you'd spank me to wake me up!"

"Minmi?" Tama-chan glared at her.

"...Other than that, I'm fine."

"I hope so."

With that, Tama-chan walked out of the classroom. Mimimi smiled awkwardly. She'd insisted she was fine, though, so it would be pointless for me to ask, too. Still, the anxiety I'd glimpsed on Tama-chan's face as she left the room worried me.

* * *

"I wonder what's wrong with Nanami-san."

It was break time before fourth period. Since it was Wednesday, I'd come to the library like I always do. This time, Kikuchi-san had started the conversation, which was unusual. She had a sharp radar for these things.

"Yeah...she did seem weird today."

"She's not usually like that."

Falling asleep in class isn't a big deal among students, but even aside from that, she was acting strange. I had an idea of why.

"She's been pushing herself really hard at track practice lately."

She'd stayed till the end two days in a row and come to morning practice for three days, even though she usually skipped it.

"...Yeah." Kikuchi-san looked down with worry. "I think she's pushing herself too hard."

According to what I'd heard at this morning's meeting, Mimimi showed up to morning practice before Hinami again today. Judging from the state of the field and equipment, Hinami didn't think she'd gotten there insanely early, maybe just twenty or thirty minutes before her.

Incidentally, my assignment for the day was to make specific movie plans with Kikuchi-san, but now it felt weird to bring it up.

"...It was the student council election, wasn't it?"

"Well," I said, unsure. "...I don't know if that's what sparked it."

Kikuchi-san kept her eyes on the table. "Hinami-san..."

"Huh?"

Kikuchi-san hardly ever mentioned Hinami's name. This was unusual. And given the timing...it was probably because Mimimi had run against her in the election.

"Hinami-san...what kind of person is she?"

"Um, what do you mean?"

I didn't know what to say. Even if we were talking about the election, that was an unexpected question.

“Oh, I’m sorry... I’ve always wondered about her. I think she’s amazing... I assumed you were friends, since you came to the restaurant together that time.”

“Oh right.” Made sense. “Well, as far as I know...”

If I told her what I really knew, we’d be in trouble. After all, Hinami was a confident, hardworking, perfectionist gamer who hated losing and could say some really terrible things sometimes...

I sifted through all those descriptors for one I could share.

“Um, she’s a hardworking perfectionist. That’s about it.”

“I see,” she said, looking uncertain again. “In that case...”

“In that case?”

She looked me straight in the eye. “Why does she work so hard to be perfect?”

For a second, I was speechless. “...Uh, um...”

I didn’t have an answer.

“Oh, I’m sorry! You wouldn’t know the answer to that, would you?!”

“N-nope.”

Kikuchi-san took a deep breath, maybe searching for a new tack.

“Nanami-san is...trying to compete with Hinami-san, isn’t she?”

“Um, basically, but how did you know?”

Kikuchi-san glanced down at the cover of her book and answered with some concern. “I didn’t know, exactly...but I can imagine.”

“Imagine?”

Did she mean it in the same way she imagined the feelings of the characters in the books she read?

“I get very curious about why certain people do certain things.”

“You mean like you try to find their motivation?”

“Uh-huh.” Kikuchi-san nodded. “Usually I can’t help imagining an answer. Of course, I’m probably wrong most of the time... It’s just how I envision the situation.” She smiled modestly.

“You do that?”

“W-well...I am writing a novel after all...” She blushed and looked down.

“Oh, r-right! V-very true! That’s important, isn’t it?”

As I desperately tried to maintain the thread of conversation, her expression tightened.

“...But I can’t guess Hinami-san’s motives.”

“Hinami’s...motives.”

Kikuchi-san looked down awkwardly. But now that I thought about it, I realized I didn’t know what her motives were, either. Aoi Hinami relentlessly strove to be the best, and I guess I’d taken that for granted. But Kikuchi-san wanted to know the reason.

“I think competing with someone whose motivations you don’t

understand must be very difficult, because you can't see your goal."

"A goal you can't see, huh..."

I tried to imagine it. A competition with an invisible goal was like a protracted fight against a monster with an invisible HP gauge. You had no idea how hard you had to fight, what your opponent's limits were, or even whether they had any. It was terrifying because you didn't know anything.

"...It must be the same for Nanami-san."

"Hard, you mean?"

Listening to Kikuchi-san, I sensed her warmhearted nature more than ever. But her words also gave me a lot to think about it.

* * *

"Sorry, I wasn't able to complete the Kikuchi-san assignment," I told Hinami during our meeting after school.

She frowned. "...I didn't think it was that hard."

She was evidently in a bad mood. And she was right that I could have completed the assignment if I'd tried. But I explained the circumstances—we'd started talking about Mimimi, and the mood just hadn't felt right. Of course, I skipped over the parts involving Hinami herself.

"I see... You're right that the situation isn't the best right now."

"Yeah. Mimimi's pushing herself a little too hard."

After talking to Kikuchi-san, I'd spent some time thinking. The problem didn't seem limited to track. The longer she stayed at practice, the less time she had to study, so she was probably working herself to the bone just to keep up.

"Yeah. But...well, I don't know. If she keeps trying to match my practice schedule, it could become a problem. But if she stops at some point, she'll be okay..."

"Yeah, I guess."

So far, the worst that had happened was that she'd overextended herself and fallen asleep in class. It would be silly to take the current situation too seriously.

"I'll try mentioning it to her casually...although my options are very limited here." Hinami looked down.

"Yeah, that's true."

"Because in a sense—I'm the cause of the problem."

"If you put it that way..."

So she did know. She understood why Mimimi was being so reckless lately. Of course she did. She was Hinami.

"...Given all these conflicting speculations and the fact that the worst result of this so far is that she's fallen asleep in class a couple

times, the best policy might be to wait and see what happens.”

“Yeah...I think so.”

“I’ll do what I can and leave the rest to her.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

The mood had grown slightly gloomy.

“But...”

Hinami’s word sliced through the pessimism.

“Given your position, you might be able to give her some advice.”

“Me?!”

Hinami looked at me solemnly.

“Maybe thinking about that should be one of your assignments.”

After our meeting, I went to the library and read an Andi book, but before long I was only pretending to read as I sank deep into thought about various things—Mimimi, Tama-chan, what Hinami had said to me. The anxiety I felt was so vague, I didn’t even know what to think about. Mimimi might come to school tomorrow back to her old self, and it would all be over as if it had never even started. I knew I shouldn’t think about it too much for that reason, but I couldn’t help obsessing. Hinami had mentioned “my position.” I felt like those words could be useful, both in fixing the problem and gaining me some EXP. Plus, she’d made it an assignment. It wasn’t that I wanted to be a busybody—I had real reasons for involving myself.

I sat there for a while, and eventually the time rolled around when everyone besides Hinami and Mimimi was finishing up club activities. I headed for our classroom, figuring Tama-chan would be there soon.

“...Back again, Tomozaki?”

Tama-chan had gotten there before me, and she started talking as soon as I opened the door.

“Yup.”

She looked out the window. “Minmi is overdoing it a little.”

“Thought so.”

“Does she just want to win? ...I’ve heard Aoi is number one in almost every single event in track.”

“Ah-ha-ha...figures.” Yup, Hinami was scary.

“I wonder what I should do.” Tama-chan seemed genuinely uncertain.

“Yeah, me too.”

I didn’t know, either. All I could do was parrot her words.

“Would it be better to stop her or not?”

“Oh...” I realized something.

“Should I stop her before it’s too late? Or should I let her reach

her limits herself?"

"...Yeah, I wonder." That problem was way too hard for a beginner like me. "You think she's falling asleep in class from practicing too much?"

"Yeah, definitely. She's wearing herself out down there right now. No two ways about it."

"Huh..."

We both gazed out the window as we talked. Once again, we stayed until they finished. Even as Mimimi's strength faded, she kept up with the unstoppable force of effort that was Aoi Hinami. I had to respect her for it. Still, even if she was okay now, I couldn't help a sneaking suspicion that at some point, in some way, she'd start to break.

Tama-chan and I headed to the field, helped clean up, and started for home with Hinami and Mimimi. The mood was as cheerful as ever. At the station near school, we split up. Hinami went one way, and the rest of us went the other. Even after the three of us were left alone, Mimimi chatted as happily as ever. She and I both lived near Kitayono Station, so we got off together there.

"Whew! It's so nice and cool at night!"

Even though the days were long this time of year, it was already completely dark out. *That's because you two practice so long, ladies.*

"Yeah," I murmured listlessly.

"What's wrong? Constipated?"

Mimimi was acting so much like her usual self, if it weren't for what Tama-chan and Hinami had said, I would never have guessed she was faking it. But I'd made up my mind to ask her here and now.

"Um..."

"...What?" she asked, a little defensive once she realized I was nervous.

"There's something I want to ask..."

"What?"

I took a deep breath and spit it out.

"As a friend who wanted to beat Hinami just like you did and who fought alongside you..."

This was the trump card I'd spent hours trying to find based on Hinami's comment. If this didn't work, I wouldn't be able to help.

"...What?" Mimimi sounded more serious than usual.

"You're overworking yourself now 'cause you still want to beat

her...aren't you?"

She gave me a complicated glance, then sighed in frustration. "Tomozaki, that was sneaky, calling yourself my comrade-in-arms! You know I can't lie to you now!" She cackled, but I could hear the sadness in her voice.

"So I'm right?"

"No," she said with a chagrined smile, then paused. "I'm not overworking myself. Or maybe I am. But I've thought hard about what I'm doing."

"What have you been thinking?" I wondered what she meant.

"It's like this: I know it'll be hard, mentally and physically. But... I'm not sure how to put it exactly... But I think you'll understand, so I'll try to explain."

"...Okay."

I shoved down the desire to get out of this with false humility ("I'm no normie—I'd never understand") and simply nodded quietly.

"It's so hard, I feel like quitting right now, but if I did, I think I'd feel worse."

I gulped. She looked at me with fierce determination.

"—Oh."

I had nothing else to say.

These were her true feelings. She hadn't even told Tama-chan. She was pushing herself so insanely hard right now, she wanted to quit. But if she did, losing would be even harder. That's what she was saying.

"Yeah...I see your point."

If that was the case, I didn't have anything to say. I knew how much it sucked to quit halfway through something and lose. That's why all I could do was stand by silently. It would be wrong for me—for nanashi—to condemn what she was doing.

"In that case..."

I couldn't unhear everything she'd shared with me about taking second place all this time. I know how painful it would be to quit in the middle, and I'd seen that faint ghost of a smile on her lips. And I knew what it was like to look up to someone special and want to do whatever it took to reach that level yourself. That's why I decided that as a gamer, as one who hated to lose, I had to respect her decision.

"In that case...do your best."

I wasn't a hypocrite; I wouldn't hold back a person who played to win and was working as hard as she could to make it happen. Should I stop her before it's too late? Or should I let her reach her limits herself? There was only one answer a gamer could give to a girl with

the drive to win:

Get your revenge for the election before I do.

* * *

It was another Thursday in Sewing Room #2.

“She looked even more exhausted than yesterday.”

Hinami was updating me on how Mimimi was doing after morning practice.

“Huh...”

But now that I knew Mimimi’s feelings, I was on her side. She wasn’t playing around. Quitting would be worse, so I wanted her to fight it out. Of course, I didn’t want her to burn out, either...

“I think...she’s hardly sleeping. I bet she’s doing some sort of training on her own after she gets home. At this rate...I don’t think she can last much longer.”

“Yeah, you could be right.”

I nodded. I’d realized something else as well. It wasn’t just track team. Mimimi wanted to beat Hinami academically, too. She could be training *and* studying at home to take her down. Given the degree of her determination, that was highly likely.

“I’d like to talk her out of this before she collapses, but if she gets it from me, it could really backfire...”

“Yeah.”

If the person you were trying to beat told you to stop...yeah. Hinami pressed her hand against her forehead.

“Do you have the confidence to talk her into quitting?”

She looked me in the eye as she spoke. No doubt she wanted me to do just that. I hesitated for a second over what to do, then decided to tell her the truth.

“She wants to give it her all—and I want to respect that.”

Hinami froze for a few seconds wide-eyed, then looked away. “I see,” was all she said.

My gamer instincts were telling me my decision was right. But was it right in the game of life? Part of me wasn’t sure. Kikuchi-san had talked about motivation. I felt like without knowing Hinami’s, I wouldn’t ever be sure.

“Hey, Hinami.”

“...What?” she answered warily.

“Why is Mimimi so obsessed with you?”

Hinami looked at the ceiling for a minute before she answered, as if she was thinking.

“...In junior high, at the prefectural championship, I was the reason her team lost.”

“Wow.”

If that was true, it seemed like a key point in the whole Mimimi issue.

“But I shouldn’t be the one to tell you about it... If you want to know more, ask someone else.”

Hinami cut off the conversation there, pressing her lips together. But I could tell from her eyes that she wasn’t shutting me down. In fact, she seemed to expect something from me. In which case, I figured I should do what she’d said.

* * *

That day in class, I worked on an assignment I’d given myself. Why was Mimimi so obsessed with Hinami? Why was she pushing herself so hard? I wanted to know.

Well, if it had to do with Mimimi, I should ask Tama-chan first.

But all I got there was, “I don’t know much about what happened in junior high!” If Tama-chan didn’t know, none of the friends she’d made in high school were likely to, either. Given that, I asked Tama-chan if she knew anyone who went to the same junior high as Mimimi—particularly anyone on the same team as her. “I’m not sure if they were on the same team, but I know a couple people who went to her school,” she said, listing off a few guys and a few girls. Obviously, I wasn’t friends with any of them. I mean, I hardly have any friends to start with. But at that point, I got some surprising information.

“Apparently Minmi was on the basketball team in junior high.”

“Really?”

Tama-chan had mentioned it very casually. This fact didn’t directly advance the story, but it gnawed at me. That meant Hinami would have been on the basketball team, too. Surprising.

At this point, I needed to figure out who had been on the girls’ basketball team at Mimimi’s junior high... Guess my only option was to ask. Interview time! I was nervous, but compared to my Spartan training, no big deal!

Lunch break.

Tightening my butt muscles and puffing out my chest, I walked up to one of the girls Tama-chan had named.

“Uh, um, Matsushita-san.”

“...Uh, Tomo...zaki-kun?”

Matsushita-san had quite a hard time recalling my name. She had bobbed black hair and a very sweet kind of look. She was sitting at her desk putting away her notebooks and pencils. I felt like I’d seen

her talking to Mimimi a lot.

“I wanted to ask you something...”

To appear as natural as possible, I lifted the corners of my mouth and spoke as clearly as I could.

“Oh, what?”

Thanks to my efforts, she answered me in a surprisingly normal way. The excitement at receiving a normal reply was nothing new, of course; that’s just what happens when your confidence is as low as mine.

“Um, you went to the same junior high as Mimimi, right?”

“...Uh, yeah...”

“Do you know anyone who was on the basketball team with Mimimi?”

“Let’s see, was there anyone...?”

“Oh, no one at our school?”

If so, this assignment would reach a deadlock.

“Wait a second! I think...there was a younger girl! She was friends with Mimimi...”

A younger girl? Friends with Mimimi? A light bulb went on.

“Um, it wasn’t...Yamashita-san, was it?”

“Yeah, that’s her! Yamashita-san! The girl who gave the speech! In junior high, she was Mimimi’s attendant!”

“Attendant...”

The old-fashioned word surprised me a little, but I could imagine Mimimi jokingly saying something like, “Starting today, you’re my attendant!” And I remembered something else. Mimimi had said she’d known Yamashita-san since junior high.

“Really? Thanks so much!”

“Was that it? You’re welcome!”

Copying Izumi’s lighthearted tone, I thanked Matsushita-san and left the classroom.

“Good work the other day! It’s Tomozaki-san, right?” Yamashita-san said cheerfully.

I was in front of her first-year classroom, having just asked one of her classmates to let her know I wanted to talk. She remembered my name after only meeting me once, but I think that was a sign of her straightforward, honest personality.

I’d rather not remember the five-plus minutes I’d spent beforehand, wandering around the hallway where all the first-year classrooms were, searching for Yamashita-san and working up the nerve to call for her. “Pardon me, would you mind asking Yamashita-san to come out here?” I’d said to some younger kid I didn’t know. It was weirdly polite.

“Yes, um, thanks for your work on the election,” I said to Yamashita-san.

The conversation started with an exchange of semi-greetings. I learn by observing.

“No, thank *you*! Mimimi-senpai was amazing, wasn’t she?”

“Oh, uh, yeah!” I agreed vaguely. She was probably talking about the ad-lib bit.

“So what brings you here today?” Her smile seemed to add, “I’m ready to help however I can!” I planned to take her up on that.

“Well...I want to know what Mimimi’s relationship to Hinami was like in junior high.”

“Huh?” she said. “Um, how do you mean?”

Oh right. I forgot. I was supposed to explain the reason for the question first. Obviously she was going to wonder. I’d forgotten to come up with a reason beforehand. Since I’m not good at witty on-the-spot responses, I went with my previous standby. “Oh, I don’t really have a reason for asking...”

Yamashita-san stared at me, confused for a second, then giggled as if she suddenly understood.

“Oh! Okay! I get it! You were on her election team, after all! Leave it to me! I know more about her time on the basketball team than anyone else!”

“Oh, really? That’s a big help.”

I didn’t understand why Yamashita-san was nodding at me so many times with that satisfied smile, but getting the details from a younger student who prided herself on knowing more than anyone else was huge.

“So Mimimi-senpai and Hinami-senpai...”

With that introduction, she told the following story.

In junior high, Mimimi was a starter for the basketball team beginning in her first year, and she was an ace player. Every year she led the team to the prefectural tournament. But the truth was, it was a one-woman team consisting of Mimimi. She put in way more effort than any of the other core members. It was obvious to anyone who paid attention. Meanwhile, Yamashita-san had idolized Mimimi, but she had no confidence in her ball-handling skills, so she signed on as the team manager.

“But Mimimi-senpai was sort of...what’s the word, a loner? She’d practice like crazy all by herself...”

Yamashita-san said she often heard people talking about Mimimi behind her back—not out-and-out bullying or ignoring her, but comments like “What’s with her? Doesn’t she know how to read the situation?” or “Is she trying to make a point about us?”

“For a while there, I’d see her smiling sadly to herself sometimes.

Like even she thought she was weird for trying so hard.”

After the team lost at the prefectural tournament, the other girls on the team congratulated each other for even getting that far, and Mimimi smiled along, but inside she was bursting with frustration. Yamashita-san was the only one she told her true feelings to. Mimimi had a different goal from everyone else on the team, a different level of commitment.

I could picture it: Mimimi smiling brightly to fit in with everyone else but secretly working hard to improve.

“At the third-year tournament, she saw Hinami-senpai and decided to work even harder.”

So that’s where Hinami came in.

For some reason, she hadn’t been a starter in her first or even her second year, but in her third year, she suddenly was. Hinami was a super ace player. The previous year, her team had been practically unknown, but now all of a sudden, she’d pushed them to the number-two spot in Japan. It speaks to how insanely amazing she is that my first thought upon hearing about it was, “Oh, so not first?”

“And Hinami-senpai’s team was also...well, a one-woman team.”

The ace player leading a one-woman team. In that sense, Hinami was in a similar situation as Mimimi. But when both went to the prefectural tournament...well, like Hinami had said, that was bad news for Mimimi...

“When Mimimi-senpai was in her third year, she...lost to Hinami-senpai’s school at the tournament. And that was the end of her final tournament of junior high. It was a showdown between two ace players, and it wasn’t exactly close...and of course that was really hard for Mimimi-senpai, but more than that...”

When she lost to Hinami’s team, it was just like the previous year when they’d hit a wall at the prefectural tournament level. Yamashita-san remembered all the other team members congratulating themselves on doing their best and getting as far as they did. This time, though, Mimimi didn’t try to fit in.

“She told me she wondered if they’d even seen what was going on in that game. Couldn’t they tell just how much effort that girl, who was the same age as all of them, had put in?”

For the first time, Mimimi told the other girls her true feelings. “Making it to the prefectural tournament? That’s nothing,” she’d said. She’d told them she didn’t want to lose—she never had.

But the other team members replied, “We know you worked hard, but making it to the prefectural tournament is amazing!” and “We did good enough. We made it here three years in a row!”

“...When Mimimi-senpai heard that, she stopped caring. She nodded and agreed, just to fit in with everyone else.”

No matter what she said, they wouldn't understand, so she stopped expecting anything from them. That's what she'd told Yamashita-san.

"But the following year, she ended up at the same high school as Hinami-senpai. I think she feels like Hinami-senpai is the only one who understands how she feels. And I think so, too!"

"Huh," I said, nodding deeply. "Thank you! This does shed some light on the situation."

I tried to look Yamashita-san in the eye as I spoke.

In junior high, she'd fought alone. But in high school, she'd found someone who understood her values, and vice versa. That's why she didn't want to lose. I had a feeling, albeit a dim one, that I had a sense of the situation now. And that meant I'd taken a tiny step toward figuring out how I should consider the problems.

"Please don't stare at me like that; it makes me self-conscious! Keep an eye on Mimimi-senpai, okay? And thank you for giving me your attention!"

"Huh? Your atten...? Oh right, thanks."

Having received this puzzling compliment, I went back to my own classroom.

After school, I went to the library and thought things over. I'm not conceited enough to say I fully understood Mimimi's feelings, but I was pulling for her.

The sun went down. I looked out the window. Down on the track, the two of them were practicing late, as usual. Mimimi had been keeping up with Hinami's pace for a week, including Saturday, when I'm sure she trained on her own.

* * *

Another Monday and Wednesday passed without my making concrete movie plans with Kikuchi-san. What with the Mimimi issue, the mood just hadn't been right. Now it was Thursday again.

Hinami had given me the same assignment of making someone laugh. If she hadn't given me a new one, I assumed the developments in the Mimimi situation meant the general "mood" dictated that I didn't need to do my assignment.

As for Mimimi herself, she was falling apart.

She staggered around and slurred her words. Naturally, she kept falling asleep in class. Up till now, she'd always said she was fine, but when Tama-chan grilled her ("Come on, be honest. You're tired, right?"), she let the truth slip: "Okay, maybe I'm a little tired." She was as much a clown as usual, but somehow, the exhaustion showed through.

I wanted to support her decision, but I was getting a little worried. Which meant Tama-chan must be even more worried. But that day after school, something completely unexpected happened.

My afterschool meeting with Hinami ended with a short discussion of how Mimimi was doing. After that, I went back to the classroom to think about what I should do.

“The rainy season sure is long this year.”

Izumi, shouldering her bag as she got ready for club activities, casually started up a conversation with me.

“Huh?” I said, looking out the window. “...Oh right, the rain.”

“Makes me feel so lazy. Messes up my hair, too. Wish it would stop before I go home. Anyway, see you later!” Izumi waved cheerfully and headed off to the gym.

The rainy season.

Even though it was already late July, the rainy season just wouldn’t stop. I figured if Tama-chan couldn’t stop Mimimi from practicing, then nothing could, but there *was* something. The rain.

I looked out the window again. It wasn’t pouring, but a steady rain was falling, and as far as I could see from here, none of the teams were practicing outside. I scanned the classroom. Mimimi wasn’t there. Neither was Hinami, of course, since we’d just had our meeting. Tama-chan...was there. She’d gone out to the veranda to check the weather.

“Raining, huh?” I commented.

She turned toward me with a complicated look on her face. “Think it’s a good thing?”

She didn’t seem to know what to do with her emotions.

“Who knows? Even Hinami can’t practice on a day like this... which means that Mimimi can take a day off and not fall behind.”

“That is true! If she won’t fall behind, then she can rest. Good thing, huh?”

“...Yeah.”

Actually, the timing of this rain was perfect. Mimimi was about to hit a wall, and this gave her a reason to rest because it was out of her control.

“Hey...look.” Tama-chan suddenly sounded anxious. She was pointing down at the field.

I looked down, too. “...No way.”

What appeared to be a girl wearing a rain slicker was on the track, starting to practice. Which meant...

“Is that...?” Tama-chan said worriedly.

But we couldn’t see the girl’s face. Who was it? Mimimi or Hinami? It definitely could be Hinami. Given her insane level of effort,

I could imagine her saying that she could handle a little rain as long as she had something waterproof to wear and that, in fact, it was a rare opportunity to practice in harsh conditions. Yeah, she might say that. She definitely might.

But if it was Mimimi...

She'd been stumbling around since yesterday, and today she was even worse.

If she was practicing in the rain in that condition...well, that was just plain dangerous.

Maybe because she intuitively understood that, Tama-chan hurried off the veranda saying, "I'll be right back!" She was about to run down to the field when I saw something.

"W-wait!" I called.

"...What?!" she called back, a little worked up.

"—It's not her."

"Huh?"

I felt relieved, but somehow uneasy, too.

"It's Hinami."

Tama-chan walked back to the veranda and stared hard at the girl down below for a few moments.

"...You're right."

She sounded like she'd just realized something. The energy had drained from her voice, but I couldn't tell if she was relieved or surprised.

"Yup...it's Hinami."

I didn't try to hide the fact that my emotions were still a complicated mess.

"Think Minmi went home?"

"No idea..."

We stayed there for a while, watching the field and exchanging a couple of words every now and then. Mimimi made no sign of appearing, but Hinami kept practicing in the downpour for twenty, thirty, and then forty minutes.

"She's not coming, is she?" Tama-chan said flatly.

"Well, the rain's pretty awful." I knew it was a pointless comment, but I said it anyway.

"It's better that way...right?"

Somehow, Tama-chan's words lacked their usual gravity, like she didn't even know herself how she was feeling.

"Yeah, guess so," I agreed absentmindedly. Both of us fell silent again.

There was Hinami, practicing in the rain like an idiot. As I stared

vacantly down at her, my feelings gradually came into focus.

When I thought Mimimi might be down there, I'd wanted her to stop practicing in the rain because it was dangerous. But more than that, as a gamer who had fought alongside her, I was cheering her on. I'd hoped from the bottom of my heart that she would beat Hinami and get her revenge.

Right now, I'd witnessed her hit a wall.

The simple truth was, she'd given in to the rain as a reason not to keep pushing herself.

In short, I'd come to a realization within myself.

No matter how hard Mimimi tried from here on out, she'd never beat this particular monster. Aoi Hinami was too much.

Soon the rain became a torrent, and even Hinami had to go home. We watched till the end, and then Tama-chan went to practice while I went home.

6

There are some problems a bottom-tier character can't fix alone

The next day was Friday.

According to what Hinami told me at our morning meeting, she'd come to school at her usual time and worked on getting the field in as good shape as possible before afternoon practice, but Mimimi hadn't shown up. It probably hadn't occurred to her to spend morning practice fixing up the field after the rainstorm.

That day, Mimimi was cheerful, but not herself.

She didn't fall asleep in class. She wasn't stumbling around. Most likely, she'd recovered a bit thanks to taking a day off for rain.

But she didn't do as many silly things as usual—things like nibbling on Tama-chan and otherwise harassing her or coming to talk to me like she had since the election. Even when she was exhausted, she'd pushed herself socially, but on Friday, even after the rest, she didn't.

Of course, I might have been jumping to conclusions. She may simply have sensed our discomfort and held back in an attempt to be sensitive to our feelings. The changes in her behavior weren't dramatic—in fact, they were so subtle that someone watching from the outside would probably think she was acting like she always did.

Tama-chan seemed to be torn over something, too.

It was after school, just after sixth period.

"Tomozaki... She's down there today."

As usual, I'd killed time in the library before coming back to the classroom once Tama-chan would have arrived. As I expected, she was standing by the window. She'd left space for me like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Cleaning up the field?"

"Looks that way."

I could see Mimimi and Hinami working down there.

"But tomorrow's Saturday. Bet it'd dry out if they left it alone."

"They train independently on Saturdays. Apparently, Minmi came last week, too. They're probably getting it ready for that."

“All that trouble just for a little extra practice?”

They could leave it alone, and it'd be fine by Monday. Yet they'd stayed until now to fix it up. Honestly, I wanted to ask what could possibly motivate them to do that. As usual, it was just the two of them, sucking up the water with sponges and squeezing it into buckets. Over and over again. It was a dull, endless task.

“What about the other track team members?”

“They practiced somewhere else. Aoi and Minmi, too. Guess they ran around the gym.”

“Huh.”

Since Tama-chan was on the volleyball team, she would've seen them.

“When they finished, the two of them came back alone and started getting the field ready.”

“Oh.”

We stayed there watching them. After a while, something odd happened.

“Look at Minmi. She's been sitting down for a long time.”

“...You're right.”

Hinami was walking around with her sponge and bucket, getting rid of the last scattered puddles. But Mimimi was sitting motionless on the field. Hinami came over and said a few words to her every few minutes, but they didn't talk for long.

After a while, Mimimi stood up, walked over to Hinami, said something, and walked toward the school building and out of sight.

Tama-chan turned to me with worry.

“Wonder what happened.”

“...No idea.”

We stared at the field for a couple more minutes, but there was no sign of Mimimi. We shared a glance and went down to talk to Hinami.

“Aoi!” Tama-chan shouted when we got to the field.

“Hanabi and Tomozaki-kun?”

Hinami looked up at us, surprised. Her hands and shoes were covered in mud, which had even made its way under her fingernails. Her unceasing effort was more vivid than ever.

“Where's Minmi?” Tama-chan asked, hiding her anxiety.

“Mimimi...left a few minutes ago. She said she had something to do at home,” Hinami said in an awkward, gloomy tone.

“...Is she okay?” Tama-chan looked straight at Hinami as she spoke.

“I...I don't think so. But she didn't want to talk about it.”

Tama-chan grimaced and immediately headed toward the school gate.

“Wait!” Hinami called.

“Why?”

“Mimimi won’t talk to you; she’ll try to act strong. She’ll just smile and say she’s fine, or jump you or something.”

“But...” For some reason, Hinami turned to me. “Tomozaki-kun.”

“What?” I was confused.

“Mimimi told you some things we don’t know about, didn’t she?”

Translation: *Even though you haven’t reported it during our meetings, I know she’s told you how she really feels.*

“Um, well, I guess so.” Which was to say, *Sorry, guess you saw the truth.*

“I think there’s something only you can do right now.”

Part of me thought she was saying, *Go get yourself some EXP*, but part of me didn’t.

“Because personally, I can’t do anything.”

I don’t know what that would translate to in normal Hinami language, but she looked serious. Plus, I’d decided from the start to do as she said until I had determined how good life was as a game.

“Okay.”

I looked at Tama-chan and made sure she approved before I took off running.

“Based on when she left school, if you run, you should be able to catch her at the station before she gets on the train—the one that leaves at seventeen after!”

“Okay!”

I ran through the school gates with Hinami’s overly detailed advice at my back.

Cursing myself for running out of energy about two seconds after I started, I somehow made it to the station, gasping for breath. I looked around for Mimimi. It was fifteen after. She should still be there.

“...Tomozaki?”

I turned around to see her coming out of the bathroom, looking at me with surprise.

“Mi...Mimimi...!” I panted.

“What are you doing?”

Mimimi smiled just a little as she peered at my face. With her hair out of its usual ponytail, she looked more grown-up than usual.

“What...? I mean...!”

“You’re dripping sweat! Where’d you run from?” She gave me a troubled, less-cheerful-than-usual smile.

“I didn’t...run...that far...but I’m a...total weakling...”

“At least you’re honest.” She laughed. “...But why are you here?”

She was asking why I'd run here. Well, why had I?

I answered point-blank. "No idea."

"Huh?"

"Well, I wanted to talk to you...because you left...!" I was still catching my breath. "It's not that I have..."

Mimimi was staring at me.

"Have what?"

"...An actual question!"

"Tomozaki...you're kinda clueless, aren't you?"

"I think so..."



“Whatever! Just sit down for now!”

Mimimi and I sat down next to each other on the platform.

* * *

“Finally stopped dripping sweat, I see!” Mimimi chirped, smiling her usual smile. It wasn’t the expression I’d expect after she had worked so hard to clean up and then went home before it was done. That’s probably why it felt so strange.

Searching for a way to start the conversation, I looked at Mimimi. With her hair down, she looked weirdly sexy and grown-up, which made the strange charm on her bag jump out at me even more.

Which reminded me, Hinami had taught me that when I didn’t have a good conversation starter, I could say something about the other person. In which case, I’d add some Mizusawa style and give it a try.

“Still got that weird strap, huh?”

Mimimi laughed. “I told you already, it’s cute!” she answered brightly.

“U-uh, guess so.”

“Oh geez. Now even you’re talking about it!”

She sounded happy, though, so my plan didn’t seem to have backfired. Whew. Mizusawa Method to the rescue again. If we’re talking facts, of course, that thing wasn’t cute at all. The problem now was, I didn’t have anything else to say. Damn.

My only choice was a point-blank question. I’d start with what was bugging me the most.

“Listen, the reason you’re pushing yourself so hard...it’s because you’re going up against Hinami, isn’t it?”

“Oh right!” Mimimi said, like she’d just remembered something. “Yumi-chan said she told you a bunch of stuff!”

“Oh, um, no, um, yeah.” Looks like Yamashita-san spilled the beans.

“What? What did she tell you?! She wouldn’t tell me!” Mimimi dug her elbow into my side. *Stop it!*

“Well, um...” I proceeded to tell her everything I’d heard. When I was done, Mimimi smiled self-consciously.

“You’ve really seen behind the curtain, huh?” she said, trying to hide behind a laugh. “Guess I can’t hide anything now! So what were you asking? Was I going overboard because it’s Aoi?”

I nodded.

“I’m not sure. I think I’d want to be the best even if I wasn’t going up against Aoi. Of course, I’m not aiming for the nationals in every

field like she is.”

“So even if it wasn’t her...?”

If Hinami wasn’t the problem, why did Mimimi want to be in first place so badly?

For some reason, she gave a resigned smile. “How can I explain it? I want to really shine, and I don’t yet!”

“Shine?”

“Yeah. I realized that when I watched Hinami play, and it made me want to be in first place.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Well...you know how I lost to Aoi in my last junior-high tournament?”

“...Yeah.”

“After that, I went to watch the nationals. By myself. I thought I’d cheer on the girl I’d competed with at the prefectural tournament. I even kinda hoped she’d win in my place. But like I told you before, she ended up in second. Of course, that’s still totally incredible.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right. Especially if she was pulling almost all the weight.”

“Exactly! But at the award ceremony, when they announced that her junior high had come in second, all her teammates were going crazy smiling and saying what a good job they’d done... Meanwhile, Aoi was biting her lip and looking disappointed and glaring at the MC.”

“Oh...”

That.

“I felt like I was reliving what had happened to me. I’d worked hard to get my team to the prefectural tournament, too, and then my teammates were all excited about losing. When I saw her in the same situation, I felt weirdly close to her. Of course, I lost at the prefectural tournament.”

“No, but you’re right... It’s a similar situation,” I said, nodding.

“Everyone was hugging each other and shouting back and forth, and some of them were even crying tears of joy, but Aoi was just standing there still as a statue, biting her lip and staring straight ahead the whole time.”

“Pretty incredible...”

I felt a chill of fear. Even in her third year of junior high, she was that determined.

“But what happened next really surprised me.”

“Yeah?”

“The master of ceremonies announced the first-place school.” Mimimi took a deep breath. “When they said the word ‘first place,’ Aoi’s mask finally broke, and she started crying.”

“...Wow.”

That was all I could say.

“She didn’t cry when her own team’s name was called for second place, but when the other school’s name was called for first, she did. It was like, this girl only sees victory. It was incredible.”

“That’s...” *Amazing*. All I could do was nod earnestly.

“When I saw her, I felt like, okay, when you lose, it’s okay to be upset. I wasn’t wrong after all.”

“...Yeah.”

“But then at the same time, I felt...embarrassed, or something, for not being able to push through to where she was... To not bend to others, to stay true to myself and just sob like she was. Even though she’d lost, I could see there was something special about her. I was always trying to fit in, but she was totally different.” Mimimi gave me another resigned smile. “It was like I realized that I wasn’t special; I was just an ordinary person... Yeah. And I wanted to be special like her. For me, Aoi is the one I admire the most and the one I feel most grateful to. That’s why of all the people I could lose to, I don’t want it to be her.”

I don’t know what expression was on my face, but I nodded.

“...But listen,” I said, looking Mimimi in the eye. “Does it have to be first place?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Would you be unhappy even if you beat your own record or something like that?”

I gave it to her straight. She hesitated for a moment before speaking. “But didn’t you say you wanted to win? Being a gamer and all?”

Oh right. But that’s a little different.

“Okay, I hate to lose, so I shouldn’t really talk here, but being number one isn’t my real goal. If I had to choose, I’d say the desire not to lose to myself is stronger.”

“...To yourself? Not to other people?” Mimimi looked at me blankly.

“I mean, I do want to beat other people. But in the end, that’s about fighting myself, too. There’s no end to it if you’re trying to be number one, and anyway, that’s not my only goal. Of course I want to win at tournaments, but that’s not what I’m truly after at the end of the day. When it comes to *Atafami*, that is.”

Mimimi was listening to me with shock.

“Anyway, what I want to say is this. If you work hard, it’s worth it as long as you see some results. Even if you don’t end up in first place. It’s not a waste of time if you improve in some way. I mean, if everything other than first place was a waste, then ninety-nine percent

of the people in the world would be wasting their lives. So...even if you don't win, as long as you can see some improvement in yourself, then I think you're good."

After I told Mimimi my theory of gaming, she thought for a minute, then responded.

"I'm not sure. I..."

"Yeah?"

She looked away from me and fiddled with her weird key chain. "I don't have anything like *Atafami* that I want to do really badly. The only reason I joined the track team is because Aoi was joining."

"Yeah, you did say that."

"I was so surprised when I saw her at the high school entrance ceremony. *Wow*, she's *here*, I thought. But we'd only played one game against each other, and she was this incredible person who'd taken second in nationals, so I wasn't sure if I should talk to her."

"Oh...uh-huh, I could see that."

So even social butterfly Mimimi hesitated to talk to people sometimes.

"But after the ceremony, she came up to me in the hallway," she told me slowly, like she was paging through a meaningful photo album.

"Huh."

"Even better, she goes, 'Hey, we played each other in the second game of the prefectural tournament, right?!'"

"So she remembered."

Mimimi nodded happily. "And then she says, 'I've been thinking about you ever since that game.' And I go, 'Really? Thanks,' and smiled, and then she gets serious and says, 'Listen.'"

"Oh yeah?"

Mimimi smiled and nodded. "I didn't know what she was going to say, but then she lowers her voice and goes, 'I could tell playing you that you practiced a ton.' That was a surprise. I smiled and said 'Yeah,' and she said, 'I wish I could have played on a team with you.'"

Mimimi was grateful for that, I could tell.

"Wow...from the famous Hinami!"

"She really saved me that day. She understood me. I was so glad."

"...I bet."

I knew the feeling. You're going along thinking it doesn't matter if anyone recognizes your effort, that you're doing it all for yourself. And then someone shows up who's worked as hard as you have, someone you can truly respect, and they affirm what you've done. It can be such a weight off your shoulders.

"After that, we became friends and joined the track team together. I worked pretty hard at it, too. But around the second semester of our

first year, Aoi took first place on our team for high jump, which was my event, even though she was a sprinter.”

“Ohhh.”

“I was kind of expecting it, but it was still a shock. I’m naturally good at sports, and I work harder than most other people. I do! I’m pretty good, right? ...But she beat me easily.”

I looked down as I said, “Oh.”

“Once again, I had this sense that I would never be special.”

“Special...”

“If you wanna shine, you’ve gotta be number one...but it was, like, impossible! I mean, celebrities are the ones with the spotlight, right? Sorry this story is so depressing; it’s just how I felt!”

With her usual cheer, she hurriedly cut off her monologue.

“Oh, no worries.”

“Well, that’s my story! But you’re right! Ultimately, there’s only so much a person can do, and I just don’t have what it takes! Thanks, Tomozaki, I feel better after talking to you! Oh look, here comes the train.”

“Yeah,” I said, watching the train pull up. Mimimi stared at it without making a move to get up. I clenched my fist in my pocket, running through all the techniques I’d learned, all my own experiences, and everything I knew about the human heart.

“...But.”

“What?”

She peered at me with that overly natural smile. There was only one thing I could say after listening to her story; I summoned my courage and told her how I really, truly felt.

“But...in my opinion, you’re shining pretty brightly already.”

I tried as hard as I could to sound serious and not let my voice quake. Mimimi widened her eyes in surprise and, after a long pause, responded:

“...Ah-ha-ha. Thanks.”

It was a lonely laugh. From her expression, I could tell I hadn’t really reached her. My attempt at encouragement must have sounded to her like some silly joke that didn’t resolve anything. My powerlessness as a bottom-tier character was suddenly obvious.

“Anyway, I don’t care anymore, so don’t worry about me! Oh, sorry; I think I’ll head home by myself today!”

“Mi...”

Before I could stop her, she’d gotten up from her chair and squeezed onto the train. And before I could follow, the doors had closed and her small form was fading into the distance.

The weekend passed, and I was once again at my Monday morning meeting with Hinami.

“She didn’t show up... Not on Saturday and not for morning practice today.” Hinami bit her lip.

“Oh...” I gripped my head.

“What happened on Friday?”

“We talked a lot, but...”

Trying to skirt the parts that had to do with Hinami, I gave her a rundown of our conversation.

“I see,” she said, looking down sadly. “But you...”

I sensed something accusatory in her tone.

“N-no...”

I felt bad, and I didn’t have any excuse. But it turned out my failure with Mimimi wasn’t what I was in trouble for.

“You said something I wouldn’t expect from you.”

“Huh?”

I was confused. I’d said a lot of things to Mimimi, but all of them were the honest truth.

“I mean, you’re the same as me in that respect, right? You must be, if you’ve gotten that far in *Atafami*.”

Yeah, she was definitely grumpy with me over something.

“What do you mean ‘the same’? What did I do that was so unexpected?”

She was quiet for a brief moment. “You really don’t know?”

“Nope.”

She nibbled her lip. “I mean, nanashi would never think ‘It’s fine not to be number one.’”

Her total confidence surprised me.

“...What the hell? I genuinely think that. *Atafami*’s a battle against myself.”

“What...really?”

“Yup.”

When I nodded, she opened her mouth a little in shock. “Really,” she muttered.

“What? Is it that important?”

“No. The Mimimi issue is more important. Point is, it didn’t go well...”

She returned to the subject at hand, her face filled with sorrow. But really, what was that about just now? It bothered me, but we had more important things to talk about.

“No, it didn’t... I’m sorry.”

“No, I couldn’t do anything, either. I just shifted the responsibility

to you.”

She seemed hurt. An awkward silence overtook the familiar atmosphere.

“Oh, um, right, what about today’s assignment...?”

I fumbled for words to relieve the awkward tension a bit.

“Today’s assignment...” She looked at me gravely. “I want you to think about Mimimi’s true feelings, the ones you hid from me just now, and reflect on what you and only you can do to fix this situation.”

“...Hinami.”

Once again, she’d seen right through me.

The meeting ended with a minimum exchange of words.

That day during lunch break, everything changed.

“What, why...?”

We were in the classroom, and Tama-chan was reacting with surprise to what Mimimi had just said.

“I mean, there’s a lot of reasons!” Mimimi said clownishly, standing near my chair. Her face was cheerful, like her worries had been swept away. But everyone who overheard them was speechless.

I was in shock, too. Made sense, given what she just said.

“Minmi, you’re really quitting?”

Apparently, she’d turned in the form to quit the track team.

Mimimi nodded. “Yup. I thought about it over the weekend and decided this would be best!”

“But...”

I was close enough to hear the whole conversation, but I couldn’t find a pause to slip in. When I looked up, I saw Hinami approaching.

“Is it true?”

When Mimimi saw Hinami, she looked the tiniest bit sad for a second, then right away, she smiled.

“Yeah, it’s true! I’m sorry, Aoi! But I thought over a bunch of stuff! My body can’t take any more of this!” she said cheerfully, parroting the famous old sumo line.

“...I wanted to keep running track together.” Hinami looked disappointed. To me, knowing Mimimi’s true feelings, her words struck a cruel and painful chord.

“...I’m sorry, Aoi.”

“No, there’s nothing for you to apologize about!”

“Ah-ha-ha.”

The other students in our class watched their conversation nervously.

“...Tomozaki.”

I turned around. Izumi was whispering my name.

“What?”

“Isn’t this awkward?” She looked worried.

I answered honestly. “Yeah...it is, a little.”

“What happened? Did they get in a fight?”

“...No.” It wasn’t a fight. “Maybe more like a misunderstanding...”

“Oh... Can’t they make up?”

“Make up?” I was unsure. “Well, but...”

“But?”

That’s when I realized what the biggest problem in this whole situation was.

“Nobody did anything wrong.”

All day, Mimimi was clearly feeling low. If someone talked to her, she answered normally, but she didn’t once clown around like she usually did.

* * *

After school, Mimimi didn’t change into her track uniform. Instead, she got ready to go home. She really was quitting.

“Tama! Sorry to leave before you today!” she chirped. She was surrounded by four of her normie friends, who apparently were going home with her. Impressive, Mimimi.

“...Um.”

Tama-chan looked like she had mixed feelings about all this. There was an awkward pause; she seemed on the verge of saying something but then couldn’t. A high wall of normies had risen in front of her, preventing her from saying anything to Mimimi about quitting the track team. She took one step forward but then, after a minute, retreated again.

“Bye, Tama! See you tomorrow!”

Mimimi was turning to leave the classroom when something dawned on me.

Hinami had given me an assignment: *Reflect on what you and only you can do.*

There was no way a bottom-tier character like me could save Mimimi; that was an outrageous goal. My words hadn’t reached her. And when that happened, I assumed I’d reached a deadlock.

But here was something I could do.

Over these past few weeks, you’ve learned to take action.

That was the only achievement of mine Hinami had given her

stamp of approval. I'd show her! I had my own unique way of solving this problem, and all I had to do was take action!

"Mi-Mimimi!"

"Huh?"

Approaching Mimimi and her posse of normies, I called out to her, failing completely to modulate my volume. The normies eyed me with suspicion. This was bad. Very awkward. But I ignored them. Suppressing the queasiness in my stomach through sheer force of will, I kept talking.

"Wanna go home together?" I asked her.

Huh?

I could almost hear the normies' thoughts as they gaped rudely at me in unison.

"...Huh?"

Hell, Mimimi was gaping at me, too. But the normies' jaws were about five times closer to the ground. Finally, one of them said, "What's Tomozaki talking about?!" and I became a harmless joke.

Not just the four normies standing around Mimimi, but practically the whole class witnessed it, since homeroom had just ended, and most students hadn't left yet. "Creep!" Erika Konno called, at exactly the right volume for me to overhear. There it was—my old ridiculous position. It was like everyone was thinking, *Hey, that loser who's been getting around lately is being a creep again.* I could hear people whispering nasty stuff. Willpower wasn't enough to keep my stomach from tightening.

I pretended I didn't notice any of it and took a deep breath.

"Come on, walk to the station with Tama-chan and me."

Tama-chan looked at me in surprise, then walked over to me.

"I'm skipping volleyball today," she said, totally serious. *Nice, Tama-chan.* Saying she'd skip out with a totally straight face. The class fell silent at this bizarre situation. Mimimi froze for a minute in shock, then smiled again and turned to the normies surrounding her.

"...Sorry, ladies, I hope you won't mind if I go with them. Tomozaki was so brave, I just can't help it!"

Smoothing the situation over like it was no big deal, Mimimi joined Tama-chan and me, and the three of us headed out.

Hinami watched us tight-lipped, maybe in prayer or maybe in deep thought. But I'd come up with my own answer to her challenge. *Reflect on what you and only you can do.* That was the assignment she'd given me just that morning. Once I thought about it, the answer was simple, and this was the only possible option.

Call for help without giving a damn what other people think.

Tama-chan, it's in your hands now.

“And then Hama-chan went and...”

As we walked home, Mimimi was chattering nonstop about comedy movies and celebrity gossip and this and that, either to fill the silence or to draw some kind of line. There was no space to bring up a new topic—Mimimi, the master introducer, was drawing on her full powers. There was no way I could cut in.

“Can you believe it? They snapped her picture right then...”

“Minmi. I want to ask you something.”

So Tama-chan charged in instead. Her specialty.

“...What?”

Mimimi laughed awkwardly. Tama-chan paused for a few seconds, like she was trying to decide where to start.

“Did you start to hate Aoi?”

“Um...”

Mimimi sounded bewildered; I couldn’t say anything at all. She’d gone way beyond what I expected. What a way to start.

“Well, you did quit track.”

Mimimi shifted her eyes around and shook her head, obviously embarrassed. “Of course not!”

“...Are you sure?”

“Of course! I mean, Aoi is a great person. She can do anything.” The smile she’d pasted on to deflect the tension gradually started to fade. “I respect her and count on her, and she really understands me.” Mimimi’s voice grew quieter and quieter. “She’s a total star, and she’s special, and...”

All I could do was listen silently. Her pace slowed, and she looked down.

“Then why are you quitting track?” Tama-chan still didn’t let up on her interrogation.

“Because I...”

“You what?” Tama-chan urged gently.

Mimimi barked a laugh. “In the end, I guess I just have a lousy personality.”

“What?” Tama-chan asked, confused.

Mimimi was getting more and more emotional. “It’s just...think about it. There’s no way I could hate Aoi.”

I caught my breath at the tears glittering in Mimimi’s eyes. Tama-chan listened like she was giving her an invisible hug. “Uh-huh.”

“I shouldn’t, but I...” The tears were growing bigger. “I’m such a

terrible person.”

“Terrible?”

Mimimi stopped walking, and Tama-chan and I did the same.

“I mean, it’s awful. Here we are at the same school, and Aoi hasn’t done anything wrong. I couldn’t beat her, and I got so frustrated. It’s wrong to think that way...! I’m just like everyone else...” Mimimi wiped her tears, looking embarrassed.

“Think what way?”

“About Aoi! ...She’s such a great person, and she’s always working so hard to help her friends. She’s never stuck up, and she’s always thinking about me. She completely understands me. I love her.”

Tama-chan watched Mimimi intently.

“...Or I should, but...!” Huge tears spilled down her cheeks. “But she beats me at school *and* at track! I got jealous of her! She was like...a thorn in my side, or an obstacle in my way...and I wanted her...to go away!! That’s how I felt... I couldn’t help it...”

She was crying and sniffing as she confessed her feelings.

“...Uh-huh.”

“How could I be any worse? But ever since I joined track, I couldn’t stand losing. I started having all those thoughts...and I hated myself so much for having them...”

“...Uh-huh.”

“I was thinking those things even when we were practicing together after school. Why didn’t she ever stop practicing? If she cared about me, she’d stop right away. *Come on, read the situation, Aoi!!* I started thinking... And I didn’t want to feel that way about her anymore...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And that’s why I quit.”

“...Uh-huh.”

Now that she’d let it all out, she was calming down.

“...I sensed it a little. She was amazing, and it frustrated me, but...the reason she was amazing...was that she worked harder than me. It’s always been that way.”

Tama-chan never took her eyes off Mimimi.

“It’s like, it might be okay to be jealous if I worked as hard as her and still never got ahead, or if I worked harder than her, but...”

Listening to her, I was starting to feel hopeless and miserable.

“In the end, Aoi just works harder.” Mimimi laughed at herself. “I don’t even have the right to be jealous of her... I wonder why she works that hard.”

A shadow fell over her face.

Just at that moment—chomp!

“Eek!”

Tama-chan leapt over to Mimimi like a real volleyball player and took her ear in her mouth. *What the heck?!*

“Hey, Tama...what...? Ah! That...tickles!”

Mimimi grabbed hold of Tama-chan’s fluffy hair and skirt hem, twitching with the movements of her lips. Tama-chan kept nibbling with a very serious expression, and then she stroked Mimimi’s neck with one finger, which made Mimimi gasp. I stared in shock at this unexpected development.

“...Minmi...”

“Huh?”

“Minmi, do you want to be number one no matter what?”

“It’s just...I’m nothing...”

“Nothing?”

“I don’t shine like Aoi; I’m not invincible at something like Tomozaki; I don’t have a sense of self like you... If I don’t work hard, I’m just empty...”

Tama-chan hugged Mimimi harder.

“...Minmi, you’re...”

Tama-chan’s voice was full of genuine gratitude.

“You’re my hero.”

“...What?”

Mimimi lifted her face up from Tama-chan’s chest. Tama-chan stopped hugging her, took a step back, and looked her in the eye again.

“You always say you’re fine and smile and push yourself too far and work hard. But you never show anyone...that you’re saving me. I like Aoi, too, and everyone else...but I only have one hero, and that’s you.”

“...But...”



“If you still want to be number one...”

Tama-chan pointed at Mimimi’s face and told her off in her typical Tama way—only this time she was a little more intense, like she was communicating something incredibly important.

“To me, you’re the biggest idiot in the world! You’ll have to make do with that!”

Mimimi widened her eyes and blinked a few times. Finally, she focused intently on the finger still pointed at her face—and then...

“Nom!” Her eyes still teary, she started sucking on it.

“Eek!” Tama-chan snatched her arm back. “What are you doing?!”

Wiping her tears away with her slender fingers, Mimimi snickered mischievously.

“Come on...”

“Wh-what?” Tama-chan said, backing away warily just the slightest bit.

Mimimi grinned happily. “You said I was an idiot. Isn’t this what you meant?”

“...Minmi.”

“Tama!” Mimimi flung her arms around Tama-chan’s neck and hung there with her whole weight.

“You idiot! You’re heavy! Get off me!”

“What? Who did you call an idiot? Say it again!”

“Shut up, idiot!”

The two of them were building their own private girl-on-girl world with their usual enthusiasm—with a bit more enthusiasm than usual, actually. *Geez, get a room, you two. Much as I like the eye candy.* But that aside, it seemed like a lot had been resolved, and I was happy about that. Like I said, the friendship between girls is a beautiful thing.

But there was one problem, and I’d already noticed it.

I’d left everything in Tama-chan’s hands, which meant I had zero accomplishments to report to Hinami.

“Tomozaki! Let’s go!”

“Oh right.”

I spun around and caught up with the two of them, wondering what I should do. As it was, I was sure Hinami would unleash her full vengeful anger on me: “You didn’t do a damn thing this time, did you?!” I could imagine her smirking the whole time, too.

Hounded by looming dread, I ran through the conversation topics I’d memorized, searching for one that would work for both of them and hoping desperately to find a lifeline here with them.

And then something dawned on me.

I had the perfect topic. I'd been wanting to ask Mimimi about it for a while, and it related to Tama-chan, too.

"Hey, Mimimi."

"Huh? What?"

She turned toward me, the shadows gone from her face. I went for it.

"So what was that magic fingers thing all about anyway?"

As soon as I asked, Mimimi burst out laughing, and Tama-chan turned beet red and pointed at me sternly.

"I told you already! That's not something you ask girls!!"

What the heck? Tama-chan was the one who told me to ask Mimimi!

"You're bringing that up now?! Like I said, you've got a wild streak, Tomozaki!"

"What? No, I don't!"

"But nice move!"

With that, Mimimi raised her hands above her head. *Here it comes.* I prepared my shoulder for attack. I knew exactly what she was up to.

But I didn't dodge. I took the hit straight on.

"Owww!!"

It was the hardest blow she'd given me yet, and it hurt like hell.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Oh, hey, Hinami. I just made someone laugh. It was a coincidence, but it's not like I didn't help.

Accessories are the only equipment every character can share

What happened after was basically the best-case scenario.

First, Mimimi went back to the track team surprisingly quickly, given all the fuss she'd raised. Some of her teammates were critical, but she was duly apologetic and rejoined successfully. Most of them didn't know what had happened, so it was fairly chaotic, and she rejoined the very next day after she turned in the form to quit. After apologizing to everyone, she apparently introduced herself by saying, "I'm your new team member Nanami. Looking forward to running together!" and everyone rolled their eyes and called her an idiot, which successfully turned the whole situation into a source of good-natured gossip. Mimimi does it again.

As for the key problem of Mimimi's feelings toward Hinami, it seemed that the jealousy and desire to win that had blurred into her gratitude and respect faded significantly thanks to her talk with Tama-chan. On the other hand, I feel like her sexual harassment attacks on Tama-chan increased threefold, which I'd call a plus. After all, it was fun to watch. Keep it up, Mimimi.

All the big events happened on Monday; the situation was wrapped up on Tuesday; and then it was Wednesday, the last day of first semester—a bit later than other schools, since we're a college prep. In other words, tomorrow would be the start of the long-awaited summer vacation.

But before it began, I received my toughest assignment yet.

"Oh, uh, thanks..."

"Oh, um, it's nothing. You helped me out."

"Ah, um..."

The last homeroom of the semester had just ended. A minute earlier, Izumi had declared "I have to go to him!" like some TV character struck by a sudden impulse, and then she'd walked up to Nakamura and handed him a small, cutely wrapped package. Both of them were blushing and avoiding eye contact as they stumbled over

their words in a pure and innocent conversation. *Come on, guys. Get together already.*

That's right—it was Nakamura's birthday.

Unfortunately, their one-on-one was doomed to be short-lived. Why? Because today Hinami had given me the following assignment:

Give Nakamura his present and talk to him for at least three minutes.

Seriously? What was that about? Was this half for her personal entertainment? But when nanashi makes a decision, he follows through, which left me no other option except obedience.

“N-Nakamura.” I busted into their little world, an entirely unwanted nuisance.

“Oh, hey, Tomozaki.”

He seemed less harsh than usual. Maybe I had Izumi's present to thank for that?

“Uh, here...this is for your birthday.”

“...Huh?” He gaped at me in confusion.

“Listen, just take it already!”

I pulled the unwrapped present out of its paper bag and thrust it toward Nakamura. He stared at it in surprise.

“...A controller.”

I nodded. When we'd played *Atafami* in the old principal's office, I'd assumed the console was Nakamura's, and the stick on the controller had been on its last legs. In *Atafami*, a worn-out stick is a fairly serious problem. The problem is deeper than just difficulty controlling your character; you'll do the same motions but get a different result each time, which not only interferes with the game at hand, it also gets in the way of skill-building. That's why the controller is so crucial to anyone who wants to practice in order to get better. Also, even at big tournaments, everyone brings their own controller.

I explained it all under the terrifying gaze of Nakamura. Aka, I bought time by talking about *Atafami* and some other things I'd already thought about. Three minutes—that was my assignment.

“Huh...,” Nakamura said, nodding with great interest. “Okay, did someone above you tell you to do this?” he asked, frowning. Scary, scary!

I answered honestly, as usual. “No, it's not that...”

“What, then?”

“When it comes to people who hate to lose...well, I get it—I mean, I kinda know where they're coming from...and since I'm a gamer who loves *Atafami*, I've got a thing about fair play...”

I managed to explain myself, even if I did trail off at the end as I crumbled under Nakamura's coercive aura.

“That so?” Nakamura deadpanned. “...I'll take it.”

“...Okay.”

Nakamura put the controller in his bag. I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. When I glanced in that direction, Izumi was giving me a low wave and winking, as if to say, “You did it!”

Oh right—this was part of her big scheme to help us make up. Guess that scheme succeeded?

“Oh.”

I glanced at my watch. Three minutes hadn’t passed yet. *Shit, what do I do?* Hinami was standing nearby, and she was probably timing me. Even if she wasn’t, I’d come this far, so why not go all the way?

I frantically searched my mental files for a conversation topic I could use on Nakamura, blurting out the first one I hit upon.

“B-by the way, is it true that Hinami and Mizusawa are dating?”

* * *

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Mimimi burst out laughing at a family restaurant on the way home from school. She’d invited me to join her, Hinami, and Tama-chan for lunch there. We met up after the three of them finished club, and I read an Andi book in the library. What the heck? If you didn’t know better, you’d think I was a normie already.

“Seriously, where did that even come from, Tomozaki?!”

“Oh, give it a rest!”

Mimimi was full-on teasing me after I told her what I’d said to Nakamura.

“B-by the way, is it true that Hinami and Mizusawa are dating?”

“Ha... Minmi, you sound exactly like him...!” Tama-chan giggled.

“S-sorry, Tomozaki-kun...” Hinami laughed. “Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Damn, a-all three of you...”

Tama-chan and Hinami were cracking up at Mimimi’s perfect impression of me. This was seriously hurting my feelings! I wished I could get in a time machine and change the past.

Mimimi just seemed amused by my reaction.

“But thanks for asking, Tomozaki! Everyone’s been wondering!”

“Oh, have they?”

“Yes, Aoi-san! Why don’t you share the truth with us? Well?”

Mimimi cornered Hinami with her special interview attack. Hinami looked at the ceiling and smiled evasively.

“Um...,” she said in an extremely cutesy voice. “What’s your guess?”

She looked at me and smiled impishly. What the heck? The real

Hinami would never make that expression. Honestly, she was cute as hell. I had to look away.

“Ooh! Your face is bright red! Looks like Tomozaki has a cr—”

“Hell no!”

My vocal training and comeback practice allowed me to summon something to say before that unfortunate word could be spoken.

“Watch your mouth, Tomozaki! This is a family restaurant!” Tama-chan scolded me sternly.

“S-sorry.” She’d sure popped that bubble.

“But. The point is. I wanna know, too! So what’s the answer, Aoi? Well?” Mimimi rubbed her head on Hinami’s chest as she asked again.

“*Sigh*... Guess I’ll just have to confess.”

Gulp. I swallowed without even realizing.

“We’re dating.”

“What?!”



Not only did I blurt out my answer really loudly, I also reacted before everyone else. Mimimi and Tama-chan were both too surprised by my outburst to say anything themselves.

“...So what would you do if I said that?”

“Oh geez.”

Hinami giggled, then took a deep breath and, for some reason, looked at me.

“Of course we’re not dating.”

She seemed to be speaking to me, specifically. The combination of that and the weirdly attractive look on her face, which was a perfect illustration of self-confidence, made my thoughts grind to a halt.

“...Ooh, Aoi, you are bad!”

“Well, Tomozaki embarrassed me in front of the whole class. Just getting my revenge!”

“...Oof.”

Hinami covered her mouth delicately and threw me an amused smile. Why was she being so cute? She was pissing me off.

“Mister Tomozaki! Give us your honest reaction to this news!”

“Uh, um...no comment.”

Hinami stared at me. “What? You went to the trouble of asking, and that’s all you have to say?”

Her testing eyes pierced me again. She seemed thoroughly entertained and satisfied by the way my eyes were darting between her beautiful, glistening, bizarrely attractive eyes and her ruthless yet magnetic expression. Sadistic as ever.

“Whatever,” she said, directing her gaze to the top of my head. “But look at that!”

“What?”

“Did you buy some hair wax?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Yup, it was the wax Mizusawa had demoed for me and I’d bought for myself later. While everything was happening with Mimimi, I hadn’t felt like using it, but now that the storm had blown over, I’d decided to try it out. Well, actually, I’d been bringing it to school with me every day, and when Hinami told me I had to talk to Nakamura for at least three minutes, I decided to put it on during lunch. Kind of like armor.

“This is what I got,” I said, pulling it out of my bag.

“Huh! You didn’t have it on this morning, did you?”

“Um...”

Hinami looked at me intently, grinning. Then she stuck one finger in the air. “Not bad!”

“Really?”

That was a surprise. Bet it was because I'd learned from Mizusawa. I'd done some review myself afterward, too.

"I like it."

"I think it looks pretty good, too, Tomozaki! You gonna use it every day now? ...Oh right, tomorrow is summer vacation!"

What's this? A stamp of approval from Mimimi and Tama-chan?

"But...it could just be beginner's luck," Hinami added.

"Hey now, if I did a good job, just let me have the compliment," I said, putting the wax back in my bag. Mimimi burst out laughing.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! You two are really in sync!"

"Huh?"

Actually, I think that was the first time I'd heard a real snipe from the fake Hinami.

"You really are good friends!"

"Are we?"

Mimimi had said that once before. She was right, though—to outsiders, we probably did look like friends just now. It was the same thing Mizusawa always did. He'd give some good-natured ribbing, but it didn't make you feel bad. That's what I'd named the Mizusawa Method. This was similar.

And it sounded like it gave Mimimi the impression we were friends. Very interesting. In that case, might as well use it more often.

"Well, now that the truth is all out in the open...the reason you are gathered here today is..."

With those oddly ceremonious words, Mimimi opened her bag.

"Hey, what are you up to, Minmi?" Tama-chan looked at her suspiciously.

"This is...to apologize for making such a fuss recently. I'm sorry!!" She pulled a paper bag out of her bag.

"What's that?" Hinami said.

"It's a little token of my gratitude. Or you could call it a symbol of our friendship!"

Mimimi took three palm-sized packages from the paper bag and passed them out to us... But.

"Um, is this what I think it is?" I asked. Yeah, no doubt about it. I knew what this was—one of those weird striped haniwa things. Like the one Mimimi had on her bag. The giant, not-at-all-cute charm.

"I know I caused you all a lot of worries, and you had to go out of your way to help me. We went through a lot, but now everything is back to normal! So I wanted to give you each one of these little guys! They're my favorite, and I got everyone a different color!"

She looked around the table like she expected us to be genuinely happy. I looked at the charms. Like she said, each one had different color stripes, but they all had the same haniwa eyes and mouth. To be

more straightforward, it was the polar opposite of cute.

“Th-thanks...”

Hinami was staring at her charm. Of course she was. Anyone would stare if they received one of these weird things out of the blue.

“...Thanks,” Tama-chan whispered. I copied them and added my own “Thanks...”

An uncomfortable silence fell as we all stared at our key chains. What the heck?

...Well, I guess I could understand.

No one had done anything wrong, but there had been all sorts of misunderstandings. People had been hurt when they didn’t need to be. But in the end, Mimimi had decided to give each of us one of her favorite things. Bad taste aside, it was the strongest sign of appreciation and friendship possible. I couldn’t believe she’d included me in the group. Guess I’d served some purpose despite being a bottom-tier character, and that made me genuinely happy. Anyway, it was a beautiful thing to witness a good friendship staying that way.

“...”

But this silence was going on too long. No doubt before long Hinami would break it, maybe with a rude comment that would come across as a friendly jab, à la the Mizusawa Method, and bring the brightness back to the situation. I glanced over at her.

Huh?

Hinami was gazing adoringly at the key chain. Not only that—Tama-chan had the same enchanted look in her eyes. What the heck? Finally, Hinami broke the silence.

“Ever since you put that on you bag, I’ve been thinking...”

Tama-chan nodded in agreement. “Yeah...”

Then, in unison, they said the unthinkable.

““It’s so cute!””

“Huh?!”

Suddenly, I felt alone in the world. *Sigh*. The brutal truth was staring me in the face: I was still far from acquiring a normie aesthetic.

I mean, seriously. They thought this thing was cute?

Afterword

It's been a while. Yuki Yaku here.

Thanks to all the support from you, my dear readers, the second volume of *Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki* has successfully been published. I am truly grateful.

This series has marked the beginning of my life as a working writer, albeit an imperfect one. I've learned that a great number of adults are involved in improving what I've written in order to get it out into the world, which has made me want to repay the debt in some way, and it all seems to depend on how well I write this afterword. In addition, after reading the afterword of Volume 1, in which I discussed Hinami's thighs, my editor kindly told me he was "hoping for an afterword written from a more objective perspective." I get the feeling that was a warning.

In light of those two considerations, I naturally arrived at my topic for this section: the knot in Mimimi's shirt in the second color illustration of this volume.

When I saw that knot, I felt that Mimimi perhaps existed in our own world. It may have been a hallucination of some kind, but the feeling was real.

Of course, the suggestion of her belly button and slender waist and the curving lines evoked by the overall drawing were appealing as well, but I felt there was something more important going on in this picture.

That is, the knot itself.

The presence of the knot indicates that after putting on her track clothes, she took the initiative of tying the hem of her shirt. In other words, the knot contains her intentions.

It communicates to the viewer that Mimimi is among the real-world female high school students who knot their gym uniforms, giving her a powerful presence. With regard to this particular illustration, we might even say that the knot itself is Mimimi.

Due to space limitations, I've had to keep this discussion brief, but I hope my feelings have come across at least a little.

And now for the acknowledgments.

To my illustrator, Fly-san, thank you for gracing this book with the best illustrations I could imagine: cute, beautiful, charming, and even fetching. I'm a fan.

To Iwasawa-san, my editor, you called my habit of being inordinately picky about tiny things “annoying” back in Volume 1, but I feel that you’ve begun, ever so slightly, to get used to it. Please keep that up. Thank you.

And to all my readers, thank you for lending your support to a first book by a new writer you didn’t know from a hole in the wall. I hope you’ll join me for the next volume.

Yuki Yaku

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